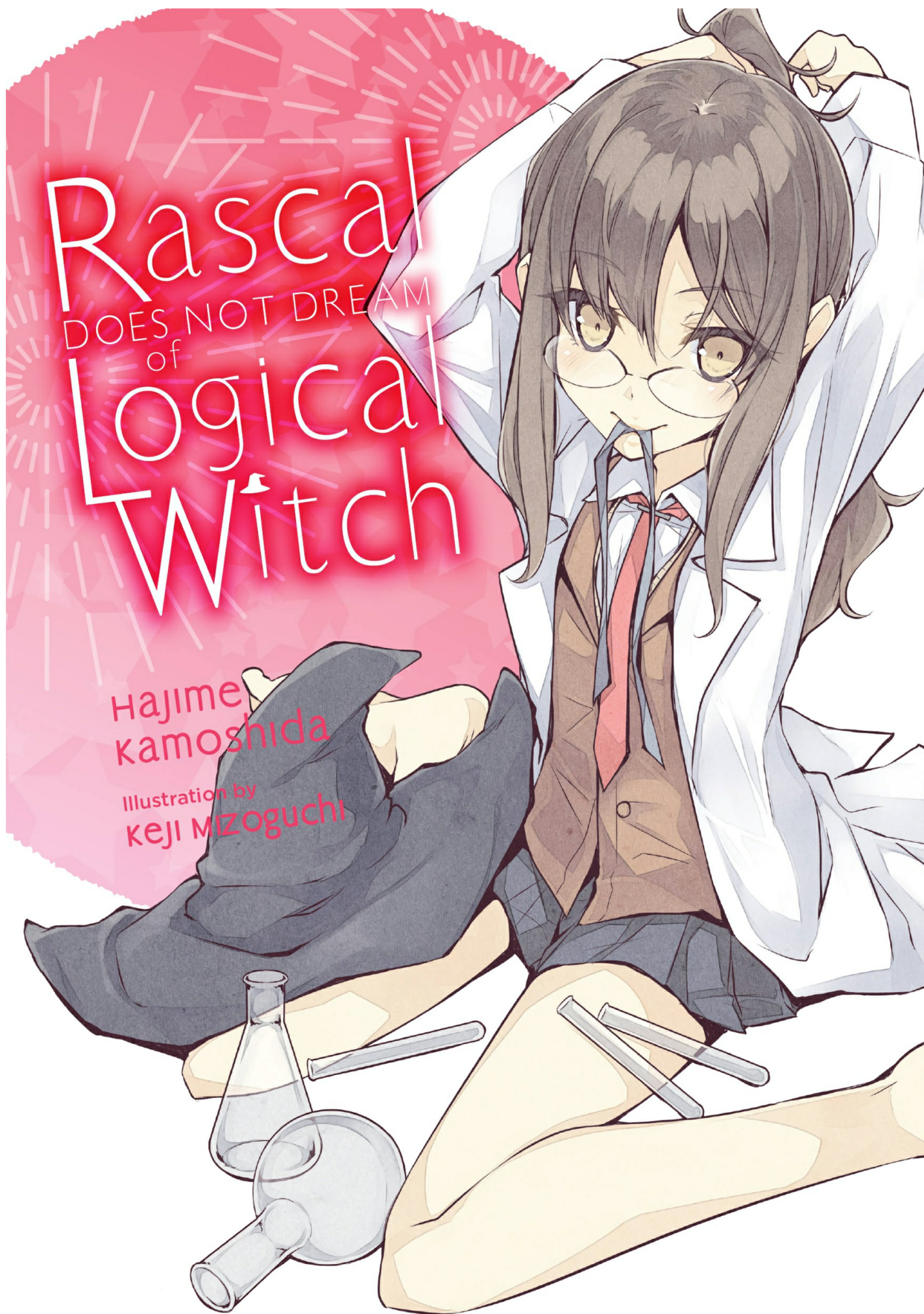


Rascal DOES NOT DREAM of Logical Witch

Hajime
Kamoshida

Illustration by
KEJI MIZOGUCHI



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Rascal DOES NOT DREAM of Logical Witch



Hajime kamoshida

Illustration by
KEJI MIZOGUCHI



Rio Futaba

Second-year at Minegahara High; in the Science Club. Has feelings for Yuuma, who is also friends with Sakuta.

“Don’t look! Don’t touch! Just get out!”

“Should I wash the clothes you had on?”

Sakuta Azusagawa

Second-year at Minegahara High. Dating the popular actress Mai.

RASCAL QUESTION 01

THERE ARE TWO RIOS, AND YOU’VE BROUGHT ONE HOME—
DOES THAT COUNT AS LIVING TOGETHER?



RASCAL QUESTION 02
MAI IS NOW STAYING
OVERNIGHT AT THE
AZUSAGAWA APARTMENT.
IS THIS WHAT IT'S
LIKE TO BE
NEWLYWEDS?

“Good morning, Kaede.”

Mai Sakurajima

Third-year at Minegahara High and a famous actress. Dating Sakuta when her schedule permits.



“This is so good! And fluffy!”

Kaede Azusagawa

Sakuta's sister, turning fifteen this year. Afraid to leave the house because of bullying in her past.



“Eep! Eep!”
The shower mercilessly
drenched every inch of
Shouko’s body.

**Shouko
Makinohara**

First-year in junior
high, twelve years old.
Entrusted Sakuta with a
kitten she found. Visits
often to check on it.

RASCAL QUESTION 03

A JUNIOR HIGH KID WITH THE SAME NAME AND FACE
AS THE HIGH SCHOOL GIRL WHO WAS HIS FIRST LOVE.
WHAT IN THE WORLD IS GOING ON?



Chapter 1 Mystery Calls to Mystery

Chapter 2 Youth Is a Paradox

Chapter 3 Friendship Travels at 25 mph

Chapter 4 A Night of Rain Washes It All Away

Last Chapter All That Remains After the Fireworks Are
Summer Memories



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New York

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Rascal Does Not Dream of Logical Witch Hajime Kamoshida

Translation by Andrew Cunningham

Cover art by Keji Mizoguchi

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SEISHUN BUTA YARO WA LOGICAL WITCH NO YUME WO MINAI Vol. 3

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———*We should kiss.*

She was in high school when she said that, but two years later, when we met again...she was in junior high.

I had no clue what to make of *that*.



mystery calls to mystery

1

That night, Sakuta Azusagawa had a dream.

A dream of the past—two years ago, to be precise.

He'd been in his third year of junior high.

Ten days earlier, he'd been rushed to the hospital, covered in blood, three mysterious gashes on his chest. Sick of seeing his doctor's troubled look, Sakuta slipped out of the hospital and boarded a train at the station nearby.

He didn't care where it took him. The only reason he'd headed to the ocean was because a TV show he'd idly watched the day before had a bit where a character sat on a beach, gloomily watching the waves roll in.

And he figured he was in the right mood for that.

That's how he wound up on the beach at Shichirigahama in the middle of the day. As he stepped onto the sand, he could hear the roar of the waves—louder than he'd expected. He walked slowly down to the surf.

The distinctive salty smell of the sea air. The early afternoon sun felt good. On the water's surface were paths of light, leading to the sun. And in the distance—well, the air must have been clean, because he could see the horizon clearly.

He gazed for a while at the line between sea and sky. Then he sensed someone standing beside him.

"Did you know?" she asked, her voice clear. She spoke softly, but he could sense the strength of her will. "The distance from eye level to the horizon is approximately three miles."

"....."

He glanced toward her. A girl in a high school uniform, holding her hair back against the wind. A beige blazer and a navy-blue skirt. She was standing barefoot on the sand.

He didn't recognize her. Didn't know her name.

When she saw him looking, she shot him a mischievous grin.

Sakuta glanced around, just to check, but sure enough, there was no one else here. Only an elderly couple walking their dog way down the beach. It seemed fair to assume the girl had been talking to him.

“Is everyone here like you?”

“Mm?”

Her head tilted to one side in evident confusion, unsure what he meant.

“Do you all go around talking to strangers?”

He was aware this area was a tourist hub. Enoshima to the west, Kamakura to the east. Maybe everyone just made it a habit to welcome outsiders.

“Oh, do you think I’m a total weirdo?”

“Nah.”

“Well, good!”

She looked relieved.

“I just thought you seemed annoying.”

“Oof, you can’t say that to a high school girl. The three worst insults! *Annoying! Lame! And tactless!*”

She had her hand on her hip and was puffing out her cheeks. He’d made her mad.

“Then let’s just go with *cringe*.”

“That’s the fourth-worst thing!” She gave him a baleful glare. “You’re in a real bad mood, huh? Things not going well?”

“What you said earlier...,” Sakuta began, ignoring her question. This was exactly the kind of attitude that made total strangers assume he was in a bad mood.

“Yeah?”

But she didn’t bat an eye. In fact, she smiled. She seemed to wear her emotions on her sleeve.

“The distance to the horizon,” he said, still relentlessly sullen. “Is it really

three miles?”

“Closer than you thought, right?”

She picked up a stick of driftwood and drew a circle in the wet sand. Then she added a stick figure and a straight line from the stick figure’s head to the edge of the circle.

“If you use the secant-tangent theorem we learn in high school, you can easily calculate the distance to the horizon.”

Using the sand as a blackboard, she scribbled a formula, but a wave came in and erased it. She hastily took a step back onto drier sand.

“.....”

Sakuta turned his eyes to the horizon again. It had seemed so far away before. Strange how it looked closer all of a sudden.

“Now it’s your turn to answer my question,” she said.

At the time, he intended to ignore her. But somehow he found himself explaining why he was here.

“I have a sister,” Sakuta said. Before long, he told the girl about the bullies.

Once he started talking, the words just came tumbling out.

He told her about the mysterious cuts and bruises the bullying triggered. How helpless he’d felt when he couldn’t do anything to stop it from happening to her. And then the baffling gouges that appeared on his own chest. How nothing was going right, and how he’d come here trying to escape those feelings of helplessness. He laid it all out there.

He didn’t want her sympathy, and he wasn’t expecting her to make him feel better. He’d figured if he told her a story like this, she’d be rattled and leave him alone no matter how much of a busybody she was. He had only shared his troubles for this petty reason. She’d been right about his bad mood.

“That’s a lot to handle,” she said.

Sakuta was confused. She didn’t appear thrown by anything he had said. She didn’t make a show of sympathy or try to cheer him up, either. There were no

follow-up questions about the scars on his chest or accusations that he must be lying. She simply held out a hand.

“I’m Shouko Makinohara,” she said. “Same Makinohara as the highway rest area chain. *Shouko* is *soaring child*. What’s your name?”

“I’m...,” he said. Almost a reflex. He stopped, hesitated, then reached out to take her hand. But just before he did...the dream ended.

His hand may have come up empty in the dream, but in real life, his palm was touching something soft and round.

He felt the warmth of another body lying on top of his. Smooth skin, slightly sweaty, snuggled up against his right side.

From the feel and weight, this was definitely a girl.

He thought about what that might mean, but then a tongue licked his lips.

He opened his eyes.

A white, fluffy, adorable creature was right in front of him, brushing his face with a raspy tongue. A white kitten.

One he’d been looking after for the past two weeks, since the final day of the first term.

He moved the kitten off his face.

But this was not the only thing resting on him. There was another...something much bigger than a cat.

A panda. More accurately...it was Kaede, his sister, wearing panda pajamas. She would be turning fifteen later this year, but she still sneaked into his bed sometimes.

Nasuno, the Azusagawa family cat, was lying on her chest. She was a calico cat, and the soft, round sensation he felt earlier must have been her butt. He was very relieved to find it wasn’t his sister’s boobs.

He pulled his hand away from Nasuno, yawned, and pinched Kaede’s nose.

“Mmph.”

Kaede made a face but then opened her mouth, securing a fresh supply of

oxygen. He considered clamping a hand over her lips but decided that was no way to treat a teenage girl, and he abandoned the idea.

“Wake up, Kaede.”

“Mm? Oh, good morning.”

She stifled a yawn and rubbed her eyes.

“Like I keep saying, you’ve gotta quit sneaking into my bed.”

“Because you’ll be tempted into forbidden love?”

“Nope.”

“Don’t worry! If you desire it, I’ll sink to any depth!”

“It’s seriously too hot for this.”

It was summer. Human warmth had no appeal at all. In fact, he’d rather not touch anyone this time of year.

Of course, he made an exception for the senpai he was dating—Mai Sakurajima. He was ready to touch her all year round.

But the world wasn’t built for his pleasure, and most days went by without any physical contact on that front. In fact, he’d only seen her a handful of times since vacation started.

Mai was working again, and her schedule was packed with filming TV shows and commercials as well as doing interviews, promotional events for her shows, and cover girl shoots for fashion magazines—all the stuff that went with celebrity.

Before vacation started, she’d said she would only be working for half of it, but that schedule had filled up fast. She had almost no time off.

And all he could do was sigh.

“What’s wrong?”

“Kaede, do you know what day it is?”

Kaede looked at the digital display on his clock.

“August second,” she dutifully replied.

“Two weeks of summer vacation are already gone.”

“Right.”

“But I haven’t snuggled with Mai at all!”

“Then snuggle with me instead!”

Kaede nestled in close.

“No thanks.”

When Kaede failed to give him some space, Sakuta sat up anyway.

“What does she have that I don’t?!” Kaede wailed.

She threw herself on him, and he nearly toppled over again. He quickly stood up.

“You’re extra needy today.”

“I am in the midst of my greatest crisis yet!”

“How so?”

“I have to master sister-*do* as soon as humanly possible!”

Kaede gave her own words a powerful nod.

What in the world was the sister-*do*? Was it related to kendo or judo? No, if it were included in the same list, there’d inevitably be complaints from the organizing committees.

Just as Sakuta decided it actually didn’t matter, the intercom buzzed. He glanced at the clock; it was already ten AM. Sakuta knew who it was before he even answered.

Only one person came at this time of day.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m coming.”

He yawned and headed to the entrance to greet their visitor.

At the door was a clean-cut young girl in a white sundress that only enhanced the image of wholesomeness.

She was twelve years old, a first-year student in junior high. She certainly

looked her age, but the collected way she bowed her head, saying, “Sorry to intrude,” made her seem older than her years. If nothing else, she was remarkably courteous and had excellent manners.

The girl—Shouko Makinohara—removed her shoes and stepped up into the apartment. The white kitten came running out and rubbed against her ankles.

“You can probably tell I haven’t fed it yet.”

“Oh, then can I do it?”

“Could you take care of Nasuno while you’re at it?”

“Okay!” Shouko looked delighted.

He showed Shouko into the living room while the kitten played underfoot.

As they passed his door, Kaede beckoned to him. “C’mere a minute,” she said. He walked Shouko to the living room, then came back to her.

“What?”

“Would you prefer a younger little sister?” she asked, tears in her eyes.

“What kinda question is that?”

“You want a clean-cut sister with perfect manners?”

Kaede glanced meaningfully at the living room. Apparently, this was the source of Kaede’s “greatest crisis yet.”

“I only need one sister, and you’re it,” Sakuta said.

“R-really?”

“I dunno why you’d think otherwise.”

“Th-then what is Shouko to you?”

“...Good question.”

Two weeks had gone by since their unexpected encounter. He’d thought about it a lot but still had nothing but questions.

Maybe she just had the same name. Still, their faces were awfully similar...and if they were simply relatives, then having the same name was particularly weird. Shouko didn’t know who Sakuta was, so he was pretty sure she wasn’t

the same Shouko Makinohara he'd met before. But the first-year junior high kid looking after the cats was the spitting image of the second-year high school student Sakuta had met two years ago. It was hard to believe she was someone else...

Which left one other possibility.

Some sort of Adolescence Syndrome was involved. Supernatural phenomena no one really believed had become a hot topic on the Internet these days. And Sakuta knew the stories weren't just nonsense. He'd already encountered two cases this year. One was Mai's, and the other involved a kohai of Sakuta's named Tomoe Koga.

It was possible a similar phenomenon was happening to Shouko. He wasn't sure if it was a recent occurrence or had been happening to her two years ago, but...

"Um, Sakuta?"

He'd been watching her, lost in thought. It was only natural that their eyes met when she turned around.

"Mm?"

"Uh, sorry."

"For what?"

"For this."

Shouko gently stroked the back of the kitten as it ate.

"I keep saying I want to keep it, but I just can't find the right moment to ask my parents..."

Nasuno sidled up next to the kitten.

"I promise I'll talk things over with them soon. Just wait a little longer."

This was why the kitten she'd found in the park was at Sakuta's apartment.

"Are your parents strict?"

"They're very nice to me."

“Not big animal fans?”

“They like animals...I think. When we were at the zoo together, they had as much fun as I did.”

“Allergic to cats?”

“No.” Shouko shook her head.

“Any chance you live above a restaurant they run?”

Could be they were worried about health code violations or customers with cat allergies.

“My father’s a businessman, and my mother’s a housewife. Completely ordinary family.”

“Huh.”

Asking anything further would start to feel like an interrogation, so Sakuta relented.

But Shouko spoke up herself.



“If I tell them I want a cat, I don’t think either of them would be against it.”

So why did she look so sad?

That was an odd turn of phrase, too. Sakuta was curious but decided not to press the point. If this were easy for her to explain, Shouko would have done that in the first place.

“But...well, I just can’t find the right moment...,” she said again.

“That’s fine.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not making much sense, huh?”

“Nope,” Sakuta said.

Shouko giggled.

“I got no problems looking after it for now. Nasuno seems happy for the company, too.”

The cats were busy licking each other.

“And you can get used to looking after it here before you have to take care of it full-time.”

“That’s true.”

“Have you picked a name?”

“I have!” Shouko brightened up considerably.

“.....”

“.....”

But she didn’t say anything else.

“Is it a secret?”

“Er? Uh, well...promise not to laugh?”

“Is the name funny?”

“N-no, it’s a normal name, just...Hayate.”

The kitten turned toward Shouko, looking confused. Like Hayate knew the girl was talking about it.

“I thought Hayate seemed fitting for a white and quick kitten.”

“Good name. Hayate can be Tohoku buddies with Nasuno.”

“Tohoku buddies?”

Nasuno and Hayate were both services offered on the Shinkansen’s Tohoku Line, but Shouko didn’t seem to get it, and he didn’t think it was worth explaining.

“Never mind,” he said.

Shouko played with the cats a while longer. Then she seemed to notice something, and she looked up at Sakuta. “Um,” she said, lowering her voice.

She glanced to one side, behind him...at Kaede, who was watching them from a crack in the doorway.

“Does Kaede not like me?”

“That is Kaede’s default attitude toward all mankind, so don’t worry about it.”

“I think I’m still pretty worried.”

Fair enough. Anyone would be.

“Kaede, you done with your homework?”

“I’m stuck on something. Can you help?”

“Then come in here.”

Kaede stepped hesitantly into the room, clutching a math textbook. She quickly plastered herself to Sakuta’s back.

“How am I supposed to teach you like this?”

“It’s this part,” she said, holding the textbook out in front of him. A factoring problem. She had already written out the needed formula properly, and she’d also solved all the problems that involved simplifying and factoring expression.

“I don’t get what you don’t get.”

“I don’t get how factoring could ever be useful in life.”

“It helps you pass the entrance exams for the high school of your choice.”

That was the sole time factoring had ever been useful for Sakuta.

“That makes sense,” Kaede said, and she wrote *Useful on exams!* in the corner of her textbook. Did she actually get his point? Was that the answer she needed? Maybe she was asking something much deeper, but Sakuta didn’t have answers for *that*. Sakuta was still trying to discover the point of calculus himself. Also trigonometry. Who thought this stuff up anyway? Sines, cosines, tangents...

Then he noticed Shouko staring at him.

“What?” he asked.

“Can I do homework here, too?”

“Summer homework?”

“Yes.”

“Sure. Use the table there,” he said, pointing at the one in front of the TV.

“Thank you.”

Shouko bowed politely and promptly plopped onto the floor. She pulled a few worksheets out of her tote bag. Turned out that she had math homework, too. Basic linear equations. Twenty problems like that in a row. Maybe fifteen minutes of work if she focused.

But Shouko put the page in front of her, raised her mechanical pencil...and froze up completely. The first problem was $3x = 9$. She just had to divide both sides by three and get $x = 3$, but her hand didn’t move at all.

A full minute passed like this.

When Shouko finally moved again, she reached for her tote bag again and pulled out her math textbook. She then opened it to the page on linear equations and started reading, but she just looked more and more confused.

“Need some help?”

“.....”

Shouko looked up at him, surprised.

“You seem like you’re struggling.”

“I-I’m fine. I can do it. I think.”

Shouko went back to frowning at her textbook.

She stuck it out for a good five minutes and then tried her hand at the first problem. She divided both sides by three and got $x = 3$.

She looked up at Sakuta, clearly wondering if she was right.

“Well done,” he said. “You got it.”

She solved the rest pretty quickly. It seemed she’d finally grasped the core concept. She didn’t hesitate much...which puzzled Sakuta. The way she acted wasn’t like she’d finally remembered what had been taught to her in class. It was almost as if...she’d never seen problems like these before and was only just figuring out the basic idea.

She finished up her worksheet and put it away.

“Um,” he said.

Shouko looked up at him. Like she’d been taught to always look someone in the eye when speaking and it had never occurred to her to do anything else.

“Can I ask a weird question?”

“Er...,” Shouko said, guarded. And blushing slightly. “Is it something dirty?”

“Not at all.”

“O-oh.”

He wasn’t sure why she’d thought it would be, but if he let the topic derail here, he’d never get around to his actual question.

“Makinohara, do you have an older sister?”

“No.”

“Any relatives who look like you?”

“Not that I’m aware of...”

She trailed off, clearly confused by this line of questioning.

“You see, a while back I met someone who looked a lot like you. She was several years older than you are, so I wondered if you two were related.”

“I’m an only child.”

“Okay.”

“How much older?”

“Mm?”

“This girl who looked like me.”

“She was a second-year high school student two years ago, which means she’d probably be in her first year of college by now—so nineteen years old?”

“Nineteen...,” Shouko whispered.

The number didn’t seem particularly significant to Sakuta, but it sure sounded like it mattered to her. Or was he reading too much into that?

“What?”

“Oh, nothing. I just can’t imagine myself in college. I wondered what it would be like.”

That sounded totally normal for someone who’d just started junior high.

“Don’t worry. I’m in my second year of high school, and I can’t imagine myself in college, either.”

“I think you probably should start working on that,” Shouko said. She said it a bit hesitantly, but she wasn’t wrong.

“Fair point.”

They chatted a bit longer, and Shouko rose to leave just before noon. Same as she always did. He walked her down to the doors of the building.

“Tomorrow’s bath day for Nasuno,” he said as she prepared to leave. “You can practice washing cats with her.”

Hayate was still small, so baths were best avoided until the kitten could better regulate its body temperature.

“Thank you for looking after Hayate,” Shouko said, bowing her head. Then she waved and turned to go.

“Once again, no progress on the mystery from two years ago,” Sakuta

muttered as he stepped onto the elevator. “Guess I’ll have to ask Futaba.”

2

Not long after Shouko went home, Sakuta also headed out—but it was a little early for his shift at the restaurant, so he stopped at the electronics store by the station.

The first floor was all new-model smartphones, so he breezed right past those on his way to the escalator. He kept on climbing, not even glancing at the floors for audio or major appliances.

Once he reached the seventh floor, the whole vibe changed. This floor and the eighth floor were home to an especially well-stocked bookstore.

Row after row of bookshelves filled the large space, each packed to the brim with books. The seventh floor was focused on specialty books, and the customer base was getting on in years, so it was always quiet and calm. Like a library.

Sakuta made his way through the shelves, checking the contents.

He wasn’t looking for anything in particular.

After Shouko left, he’d called Rio Futaba to ask for advice, and she’d said, “I’m in the bookstore above the electronic shop. Meet me here.”

But he didn’t see her anywhere. He’d imagined she’d be in the section with all the science books, but instead he found a different girl in a Minegahara uniform there, with her hair up.

He did another loop of the floor but still couldn’t spot Rio.

“A cell phone sure would come in handy here...”

Text, call, or some free messaging app—there would’ve been any number of ways he could ask where she was.

As he passed the science corner again, a voice called out from behind.

“Azusagawa.”

He stopped and turned around.

“Are you walking right past me out of spite?”

It was the girl from before, in the summer Minegahara uniform. She was scowling back at him, and when he looked closer...it was Rio.

“Futaba?”

“Did the summer sun fry your brain?”

Rio heaved an exasperated sigh. She was wearing the school uniform. It made sense that she didn't wear her usual white lab coat outside of school. But it wasn't only her clothes that had made Sakuta walk past her twice.

Her hair was different. She normally just let it hang straight, but now it was tied up at the back, revealing the nape of her neck—skin so pale it had clearly never been exposed to the light of the sun. Rio generally exposed as little skin as possible, so even this modest display was weirdly erotic.

“It's too hot to leave down,” she said, catching his look and preempting his unspoken question. As expected of Rio. What a logical reason.

However, there was something else on Sakuta's mind. His gaze shifted to her eyes next.

“And I don't have my glasses because I'm wearing contacts today.”

Once again, she didn't even let him ask. With her new hairstyle and no glasses, Rio looked really different. But her flat answers and emotionless voice proved that this was the Rio he knew.

“Why the uniform?” he asked, finally getting a question in.

Rio definitely wasn't wearing it to advertise her status as a high school girl.

“I'm stopping by school after this.”

“If you're looking for Kunimi, me and him have a shift this afternoon.”

That earned him a frosty glare.

“If I don't achieve some real results, my club of one is gonna get disbanded,” she said. “And? What did you want?”

“Oh, uh...about that...”

“Trouble again?” she asked, seeming bored already. She pulled a book off the shelf and started flipping through it. Something about quantum physics that Sakuta would likely never understand a word of.

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“Spit it out, then.”

“I ran into Shouko Makinohara,” he said, getting right to the point.

“.....”

That name pulled her attention away from the book. There was a look of surprise in her eyes. He’d told Rio about Shouko Makinohara before—how she was his first love and how he’d taken the Minegahara entrance exams because she was a student there. But not only was she not at the school, there were no signs she’d graduated or ever attended. And with no clue what had happened, Sakuta had been left nursing a broken heart. Rio knew all of that.

“She actually exists?” Rio asked. This was a reasonable reaction. Sakuta himself had been convinced they’d never meet again. He hadn’t even dreamed about her for over a year.

“And the most surprising part is that she’s in her first year of junior high.”

“Huh?” Rio squeaked. She almost dropped her book.

“Two years ago, she was in her second year of high school, but when I ran into her two weeks ago, she was in the first year of junior high.”

“Have you gone completely insane?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Then the math doesn’t add up.”

A second-year high school student two years ago would be a first-year college student now. Instead, she’d somehow gone back to junior high.

“Does she remember you?”

“No... Doesn’t seem to think we’ve ever met.”

She’d straight up said, “Nice to meet you.”

“.....” Rio mulled over this. “Azusagawa,” she said, looking up at him again.

“Mm?”

“You sure she isn’t someone else with the same name who happens to look similar?”

“That is the most likely possibility, yes.”

Sakuta had thought about it but decided that was too big a coincidence.

“Supposedly, there’s always at least three people with the same face as yours out in the world.”

“That’s just an urban legend.”

“Right. Just an urban legend,” Rio repeated, looking away. There was nothing particularly odd about that, nothing that was noteworthy—but for some reason, Sakuta noticed. Probably because he didn’t think what they’d just said would usually provoke an emotional response from her. It was the sort of thing she’d normally dismiss impassively.

“Futaba?”

“The other possibility is that she’s Shouko Makinohara’s sister and going by her older sister’s name for some reason.”

Rio just kept talking like nothing had happened, so Sakuta let it drop for the moment.

“What kind of reason?” That seems awfully elaborate.

“You’d have to ask her.”

“If I ask too many weird questions, she’ll think I’m a weirdo.”

“So? That’s fine by me.”

“I’m saying it’s bad for *me*!”

“I’m surprised you care what anyone but Sakurajima thinks.”

“Just to be clear, I’m not gunning for a twelve-year-old.”

“I don’t really care either way. I suppose the one remaining possibility is that the Shouko Makinohara you met two years ago was a vision of the future from

that point in time.”

“But I’m not the cause of *that* phenomenon.”

Simulations of the future were the product of Tomoe Koga’s Adolescence Syndrome. She was a year below them at school—a cute kohai with a peach butt.

“Since you both experienced the same thing, I don’t think we can completely deny the possibility you helped generate that phenomenon.”

“If that was involved here, then *my* age wouldn’t add up.”

“Right. But...right now, it’s not harming anyone, right?”

“Doesn’t seem to be.”

That was a clear difference from Mai’s and Tomoe’s situations. This time it wasn’t even clear if Adolescence Syndrome was involved, and it wasn’t causing any problems he could see.

Rio closed the book and put it back on the shelf before reaching for another one. Two girls in *yukata* walked past them.

They were talking about reports—probably college students, here looking for reference books.

Sakuta’s gaze followed them.

“Don’t stare, Azusagawa,” Rio snapped.

“You don’t wear *yukata* if you don’t want people looking.”

“Doesn’t mean they want *you* looking.”

“Is there a fireworks display tonight?”

“Chigasaki.”

“You knew that offhand?”

“There’s a sign right over there.”

Rio pointed at a nearby wall. Two stops down the Tokaido Line from Fujisawa Station, fireworks over Sagami Bay on the beach at Chigasaki. August 2. Today.

“Come to think of it, we all went to the fireworks last year.”

The Enoshima Evening Fireworks, held on...maybe August 20.

Sakuta and Yuuma had finished their shifts in the evening, and on the way out, their boss had mentioned the fireworks display. Figuring it would just be sad for two guys to go, they'd called up Rio. This was before Yuuma started dating Saki Kamisato.

"Yeah," Rio said, watching the *yukata* girls dispassionately.

"You wore normal clothes, though."

"So did you."

"Kunimi and I both got our hopes up, too."

He'd already been well aware Rio had feelings for Yuuma. Or maybe that was the day he figured it out. He'd caught her staring at Yuuma while he gazed up at the fireworks.

"You shouldn't have played coy! *Yukata* are always the right choice."

"Why would I wear something that cumbersome?"

"So Kunimi could see it."

"....."

Rio glanced away, visibly unhappy.

"I wouldn't look good in one."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Oh, right, big boobs work against *yukata*."

Even in uniform, Rio's were clearly impressive.

"That's not what I meant," Rio said, putting her arms up. She didn't seem to appreciate his looking.

"Then what did you mean?"

"I see no reason to tell you."

"Why not?"

“Because you already know and you’re just trying to make me say it.”

“If you think you’re too plain to dress up like that, you’re sorely mistaken.”

“.....” Rio’s look suggested she doubted his word.

“A *yukata* with this hairstyle would work quite well.”

The hair-up/*yukata* combo was a classic.

“And you tried it on at least once, right?”

“.....” She was really on guard now. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The way you’re talking, you definitely own one.”

“What gives you that idea?”

This question amounted to an admission.

“If you didn’t, you wouldn’t be talking about whether it looks good; you’d just say you don’t have one. That’s the way you think.”

Rio always spoke logically, getting to the heart of the matter.

“...You’re really too clever sometimes, Azusagawa.”

“Don’t look so annoyed.”

“Impossible. You’re an upsetting person.”

“Harsh.”

But she ignored him, picking up a book called *The Future of Quantum Teleportation*.

“If that’s all, then I’m off,” she said and turned toward the registers.

“Thanks for your help,” Sakuta called after her.

3

By the time he left the bookstore, it was almost time for his shift, so Sakuta headed to the restaurant.

His boss was standing by the register, so he said, “Good morning” and glanced around the interior. At this time of day, there weren’t many customers. Just a

group of moms sipping tea, some college students studying, and a few businessmen hunched over their laptops, working. It seemed pretty relaxed.

Sakuta headed straight to the break room in back. He had to change and punch his time card.

The break room was already occupied. One of Sakuta's few friends, Yuuma Kunimi, was sitting on a folding chair, already in his server uniform.

"Yo!" he said, waving a hand.

"Did you get even *more* tan?"

They'd last met at work three days before. Yuuma had already been very tan, but it was even worse now.

"Am I? I guess I did spend yesterday at the beach."

"With her?"

"Who else?"

"Ugh, you're the worst."

"Why? You've got a gorgeous girlfriend of your own now."

"But Mai's so busy I haven't seen her in a week."

"I saw her on TV yesterday."

"Don't worry. If it was just TV, then I basically see her every day."

He didn't know how many contracts she'd signed, but she was in a *lot* of commercials. Everything from soft drinks to new snack products. Sometimes for things Sakuta already bought regularly, but her beauty was often used to sell stuff like makeup and shampoo.

"Well, I can see how that would suck." Yuuma grinned.

Sakuta finished changing and stepped out from the lockers as he prepared a sarcastic comeback.

Before he could deliver it, he heard a familiar voice in the hall. "Good morning." But the footsteps accompanying it didn't sound familiar. There was a distinctive snapping to them.

A moment later, the break room door opened, and Tomoe Koga stepped in. A flower that lit up the previously male-dominated space. Especially since she was wearing a brightly colored *yukata*. Including zori sandals with very cute straps. She even had a traditional *kinchaku* made from goldfish-patterned cloth to hold her things.

“Urp, senpai!”

Tomoe did not look pleased to see Sakuta.

“Come to brag about your adorable *yukata*?”

Her name hadn’t been on the shift list, so she wasn’t working today.

“I haven’t turned in next week’s shift request yet, so I came in to fill that out.”

Tomoe took a blank schedule form from the plastic document case on the table. Careful not to mess up her *yukata*, she sat down on a stool, picked up a ballpoint pen, and wrote her name and availability for the next two weeks. Work shifts were determined based on employee availability, and they had to turn these forms in every two weeks. Some jobs handled all this stuff with phones, so Sakuta was glad his workplace still used the old-fashioned method.

When Sakuta said nothing, Yuuma spoke up. “Koga,” he said. “That’s a cute *yukata*.”

He made it sound so natural.

“Huh? Oh, thank you,” Tomoe said, a bit flustered. She turned a little red and glanced at Sakuta.

“You look good in that *yukata*,” he said.

“You’re being creepy, senpai,” she said while sulking.

So much for compliments. “Where did I go wrong...?” he moaned.

She’d been happy when Yuuma said it. It didn’t make sense.

“Well, you were staring at my chest.”

She held up the *kinchaku*, blocking his gaze.

“Whoa, hold up. I was carefully considering the balance of your hips and backside, too.”

“That’s even worse! Not like I’ve got the kind of breasts that rest on top of the obi. I’m so *flat*...”

Now she was totally depressed.

Yuuma started laughing.

“When did you two get this close?”

“W-we aren’t close!” Tomoe snapped.

“Something happen?” Yuuma asked, giving Sakuta a sidelong glance.

“I made Koga into a grown woman.”

“W-wait, senpai! Why’d you have to put it like *that*?!”

“I see. Koga, you’re all grown up now,” Yuuma said with a grin.

“Not you, too...” Tomoe looked betrayed. “Well, I’m meeting people, so I’ve gotta get going. See you later.”

Fuming, Tomoe bowed quickly and turned to go. But Sakuta called after her.

“Koga.”

“Mm? What?” Tomoe stopped to listen.

“I love watching girls in *yukata* turn around.”

“That’s why you stopped me?! You’re so gross, senpai!”

But Tomoe’s scowl was just cute.

“That was a joke.”

“Then what is it?”

“I can’t see a panty line, so are you going commando?”

“I’m wearing the type that doesn’t show!”

“A T-back? T-Back Tomoe.”

“I—I wouldn’t wear one of *those*! Stop imagining it!”

Both of her hands were behind her, hiding her butt.

“Already did. Best to just accept it.”

“They’re actually just covering more. Like boxers.”

“Way to ruin the fantasy. I’d rather not have known.”

“Argh, don’t make me embarrass myself and then act disappointed! You’re horribad! I’m leaving!”

“Oh, wait.”

“Again?! You’re just being obnoxious now, senpai.”

Tomoe looked up at Sakuta, bracing herself.

“Watch out for pickup artists.”

“Huh? Oh, uh...thanks.”

“You’re awfully cute, after all.”



“Don’t call me cute!”

She puffed out her cheeks, sulking.

“Fine. You’re *adorable*, so watch yourself.”

“I’ll be with other people! It’ll be fine. And I’m running late, so bye!”

This time she actually left.

Once again, it was just Sakuta and Yuuma. Two dudes.

“Uh, Sakuta...”

“Yeah?”

“What’s *horribad*?”

“No clue.”

Yuuma stood up and punched his time card. Sakuta did the same.

“Koga uses unusual words sometimes.”

“All schoolgirls do these days,” Sakuta said. Tomoe didn’t seem to want people knowing she was from Fukuoka, so he left that part out.

There were fewer customers than usual, and the restaurant was very relaxed. Maybe all the regulars were at the Chigasaki fireworks.

Shortly after eight, a family in *yukata* came in. Probably on their way back from the fireworks display. A four-or five-year-old boy dressed in transforming superhero patterns must have worn himself out, because he could barely keep his eyes open. This family weren’t the only patrons in *yukata* that night.

Sakuta took their order and went into the back to refill the straws at the beverage counter. He pulled down a box of straws off the shelf, and on his way back in, Yuuma caught his eye.

“Oh, Sakuta! Found you,” Yuuma said, grinning. “Table five’s asking for you.”

“Huh?”

“You’ll see when you get there.”

Based on the way Yuuma was grinning, it wasn’t anything bad. If the table was

asking for him, it was probably someone he knew. But he couldn't think of anyone who would come here to see him. Maybe Fumika Nanjou, a reporter who kept trying to get a scoop from him. But she hadn't shown up for a few months...

The only other possibility was Mai, but she was filming in Kyoto and wouldn't be back until tomorrow.

"Who, then?"

He went out front to see for himself.

Table five was a booth against the back wall. He could see her silhouette as he approached. She had a small carry-on bag next to her, styled like something out of an old movie.

When Sakuta stopped next to her table, she looked up from the menu. Strong-willed eyes, but the moment she saw Sakuta, she smiled.

"Why are you here, Mai?"

Yes, the customer at table five was the senpai he was currently dating—Mai Sakurajima.

The clothes she was wearing made her look older, and she had some light makeup on. She probably considered this a subdued look, but she was radiating celebrity.

Naturally, the occupants of nearby tables were all stealing glances at her. He could hear a lot of furious whispering. "Is that really her?" "Her face is perfect!" "She eats at chain restaurants, too?"

"I thought you were getting back tomorrow?"

"Most of the actors on set were veterans, and I wasn't exactly blowing takes myself, so we wrapped early."

"I see. And you missed me so much you rushed straight back?"

"Exactly," Mai said, taking the bait with a smile. "I had a room booked, so I could have taken it easy for another night, but I got my manager to spring for a Shinkansen ticket. Happy to see me?"

“Of course,” he said, like he was reading a cue card.

“...Hmph.” Mai frowned, clearly displeased.

Pretending not to notice, he took out his electronic order pad. “If you’re ready to order, go ahead.”

“.....”

“I can take your order now.”

She was getting downright grumpy, but he just kept his business smile going.

“Why are you sulking?” she asked.

“I’m not.”

“You absolutely are.”

“And whose fault is that?”

“Well...um...”

“Um?”

“...Sorry,” she said, suddenly deflating. “I know—I’m an awful girlfriend. We just started dating, but I’m already ditching you for work.”

“I wouldn’t go *that* far, but...”

“But...?”

She looked anxious. That was an expression he didn’t see on TV. This one was just for him.

“I do hope you’ll make up for it.”

“Fine. I owe you one.”

“Would paying me back involve something sexy?”

“Mildly.”

“Then I forgive you.”

“Just don’t push your luck.”

She stomped on his foot, then calmly placed an order. Sakuta punched it into his pad and then lowered his voice so only she could hear. “I’m really glad you

came back early.”

“You should have led with that!”

Mai sounded mad, but she was grinning happily.

“How late are you working?”

“Another thirty minutes. I’d love to walk you home...”

It was half past eight, and he got off at nine.

“Fine. I’ll finish eating and stick around till then.”

“I’ll swing by when I punch out.”

“Okay. Now get back to work.”

“You’re the one who called me here!”

Then he headed to the back to finish refilling the straws.

He kept himself pretty busy the remaining half hour and was able to clock out right on time.

“Bye!” he said and changed quickly.

When he emerged, Mai was at the register, settling her bill. If he’d been even a second later, she probably would have walked home alone.

They left together.

“Let me take that for you,” he said, reaching for her suitcase.

“Thanks.” She handed it over, and they walked side by side.

“Is she still coming by every day?” Mai asked. Like it was nothing important. Like she was talking about the weather.

“Mm?”

“Shouko Makinohara.”

“She is.”

“You knew what I meant. Don’t make me spell it out like that.” She gave his cheek a twist.

“Is it bugging you?”

"She was in second year of high school when she met you two years ago, but now she's in first year of junior high? How can that *not* bug me?"

She looked up at him, intent on making it clear she wasn't getting jealous of a twelve-year-old.

"I'd rather you *were* jealous."

"Of what?"

"You know."

"You already have a girl like me. Are you saying you'd throw that away to go after a literal child?"

"Forced into a life devoid of dates and intimacy...it's enough to make anyone turn to pedophilia."

"I let you carry my bag, didn't I." She pulled it away from behind him. "My underwear's in there."

"Can I peek inside?"

"Just so we're clear, I had it washed already."

"Have I ever expressed a preference for used underwear?"

"You deny you have one?" Mai looked genuinely surprised.

"What I want to see is not the underwear itself but you looking embarrassed because I saw your underwear."

"You seeing my underwear would not embarrass me in the slightest."

"Then can I see it?"

"Enough already. Back to the point."

"But I wanna flirt with you more. It's been so long."

"We can do that as much as you like later," she said, sighing.

"Aww, I wanna do it now, though."

"Fine, I'll hold your hand."

"We aren't some flustered junior high couple. That won't be enough to satisfy

me!”

“Oh? Then I won’t bother.”

Mai pulled back. Sakuta gave chase and took her hand.

She slid her fingers through his. The couple’s hold.

“That’s better, right?” she asked.

“.....”

“Why’d you get quiet all of a sudden?”

“Mai, you’re insanely cute.”

“I know I am,” she said with a sniff. But she looked slightly embarrassed by it and was avoiding his eye. “So?” she prodded, trying to get him back on track.

Clearly still asking about Shouko.

“She looks after the cats.”

“Anything odd?”

“No.”

“Figure anything out?”

“I talked to Futaba today, but no dice. Still can’t rule out the idea that it’s a totally different person with the same name.”

“Of course not. I think she is, myself. Does she really look *that* much like the girl you met two years ago?”

“Well, she’s a lot younger than I remember, so I can’t say for sure, but if this girl grew up...she’d probably be eerily similar. Then again...their personalities don’t really line up at all.”

Maybe it was because she didn’t know him well, but this Shouko was always somewhat reserved. And that was the last word he’d have used to describe high school Shouko from two years ago. She was the type to get up close and personal.

“Hmm.”

He wasn’t sure if Mai understood or not. She’d never met the Shouko from

two years ago, so she had to take his word for it—which might not really help much.

“Futaba also pointed out that *if* there is a thing going on here, it’s not hurting anyone—not like yours. So maybe we don’t need to worry.”

“If you’re fine with it, I’m down.”

She didn’t sound convinced.

Then she said “Oh” and stopped in her tracks.

“Mai?”

“Isn’t that Futaba?”

She was looking at the convenience store ahead of them. There was a teenage girl leaving the registers, bag in hand. Definitely Rio. She’d been in uniform when he’d met her earlier, but now she was dressed down in a T-shirt and shorts. Her hair wasn’t up anymore, either; it was back to normal, just hanging there. And she had her glasses on.

“What’s she doing here?”

The bag in her hand had a flat bottom—there was a bento box in it. This immediately struck him as odd. Rio wasn’t the type to be out and about at night. But here she was, after nine, walking off toward the shopping district? And Rio lived by Hon-Kugenuma, one stop down the Odakyu Enoshima Line, so it was extra weird for her to be buying a bento at a store near Fujisawa Station.

And the way she was acting was even more suspicious. She seemed to be trying so hard to avoid attracting attention, it was achieving the exact opposite.

“Mai, do you mind a detour?”

“You’re gonna tail her?” Mai asked, as if she disapproved.

But then she led the way.

Sakuta and Mai followed Rio back toward the station and stopped outside an office building maybe seven or eight stories tall. They’d seen Rio go inside.

He looked up at the signs on the exterior. A bank, bars...and an Internet café. The bank was already closed, and the bar staff would turn Rio away at the door,

so that left only one destination.

But even an Internet café would start kicking out high school kids after ten. She wouldn't be allowed to do much if she went in now. And she'd bought a bento, so...was she planning on staying all night?

"Mai, can you wait here?"

Taking a celebrity into a place like that would cause pandemonium.

"I've never been in an Internet café," she said, clearly hell-bent on joining him.

There was no use talking her out of it. So he gave up, and they boarded the elevator together.

They rode the elevator to the seventh floor. Once the doors opened, they stepped off into the Internet café. The lights were turned down low, giving the place a chill, sophisticated vibe.

"Welcome. How long will you stay?"

The midtwenties employee at the counter spoke softly, matching the lighting. She definitely noticed Mai, who was peering around the café interior with great interest.

Sakuta stepped up to the counter. There was a sign behind it showing the rates. Deals on three hours, five hours, or all night.

Sakuta point to the base rate at the top.

"We'll go with this," he said.

Two hundred yen for the first thirty minutes. A standard plan, with additional surcharges generated depending on how long they stayed. Thirty minutes should be enough time to find Rio.

Sakuta paid for Mai as well and was given two vouchers.

Mai had moved over to the free drink corner and was studying the drink dispensers.

"You can try that once we find Futaba."

"Does it cost extra?"

“If you pay the base fee, drinks and ice are on the house.”

Technically speaking, the price of the drinks was included in the base fee. They had soda, oolong tea, orange juice, and even a row of coffee and espresso machines. Same as the drink counter at most family restaurants. This place even had soft-serve ice cream, so it might actually have been better than most.

Sakuta acted like they were looking for seats as they wandered toward the back of the shop. The center of the place was packed with tall bookshelves holding reams of manga. And surrounding those were numbered cubicles with doors providing some measure of privacy.

No sign of Rio, or anyone else for that matter—they must all be in those cubicles. He could hear keys tapping occasionally. This would make it tough to find Rio.

He considered asking the counter girl, but that probably violated their privacy policy.

“If you know her number, you could give her a call?” Mai suggested, holding out her phone. Her phone case had bunny ears on it. Sakuta took it from her, but his gaze settled on her other hand.

She was holding a small paper cup. It was filled with soft-serve ice cream, perfectly spiraled. He’d said to wait until they found Futaba, but she clearly hadn’t listened. That was Mai for you.

Mai used a spoon to scoop a bit of soft serve and held it out to Sakuta.

“Say ‘Ahhh.’”

“Ahhh.”

He opened his mouth, suspecting a trap, but she actually fed it to him.

“Good?”

“Yes.”

Mai smiled happily, scooped another bite, and tried to feed him again.

“You don’t want any yourself?”

“I just ate dinner, so I’m pretty full.”

“I see.”

“What? If you don’t like it, you’ll have to eat it on your own.”

Apparently, she was determined to make him finish that entire cup of soft serve either way. Letting her feed it to him definitely seemed like the better option.

He silently opened his mouth, and Mai shoved the rest of the soft serve in, one bite at a time.

He quickly got a brain freeze. When she realized this, Mai shook her head and went back to the drink counter to make an espresso.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

He gulped it down.

When he was done, they threw away the soft-serve cup and put the coffee cup on the rack for dirty dishes. Then he finally punched Rio’s number into Mai’s phone.

She picked up halfway through the second ring.

“Hello?”

She sounded guarded. It was a call from an unknown number, after all.

“It’s me.”

“Why are you calling from a cell phone number?”

“Borrowing it from Mai.”

“Save the details of your romance for someone who cares.”

She sighed. That was exactly how he’d expected Rio to respond. It was so normal he couldn’t believe she was right here with them.

“So what is it? More trouble?”

“I just equal trouble to you now?”

“Yes. It’s your middle name.”

“Hey...”

He was about to argue the point when a cubicle door behind them opened.

“...Sakuta, look,” Mai said, tapping him on the shoulder.

He turned around. A girl was coming out of a cubicle, and her eyes met his. He immediately knew something was very wrong.

It was Rio. Sakuta was talking to her on the phone right now, trying to locate her.

But the Rio in front of him was empty-handed. She wasn't talking on the phone. And she obviously didn't have a headset on, either.

He heard an alarming sound in his ears.

“Is something up, Azusagawa?” It was Rio's voice, coming from the receiver at his ear.

But the Rio in front of him looked surprised to see him. Her lips didn't move.

“Uh, sorry, Futaba. Looks like the battery's about to die. We'll talk tomorrow.”

“Got it. If you're not in a rush, I certainly don't mind.”

“Bye.”

He took the phone away from his ear and ended the call. When he looked up, his eyes met Rio's again.

And she immediately turned to go back into the cubicle.

“Ah! Wait!” he said, but the door slammed shut.

He moved over to the door and knocked lightly.

“Futaba?”

“.....”

No answer.

“You aren't going to pretend you're not actually there, right?”

There was a *click* as she undid the lock, and the door swung open.

That was definitely Rio. In the flesh. The Rio Futaba he knew. Cargo shorts

with big side pockets. Baggy T-shirt. A striped tank top under that.

“That was me on the phone?” she asked.

A strange question in any other situation, but if there was a time for it, that time was now. That was exactly what Sakuta wanted to figure out as well.

“Yeah.”

“Then I can’t hide it, huh?”

She made a face but then resigned herself to her fate.

“Let’s talk outside,” Rio said, so Sakuta turned in his and Mai’s vouchers at the counter, and they left the Internet café.

They took the elevator down, and Rio headed for the passage connecting the JR and Enoden platforms of Fujisawa Station.

“There are two of me,” she said flatly.

Like it wasn’t an outrageous statement.

Rio put her hands on the railing of the passageway, staring at the people walking past on the other side.

“What does that mean?”

“It means what I said. For the past three days, there have been two Rio Futabas.”

“.....”

He knew she was saying something really nuts. He got that much, but Sakuta’s brain just refused to process it. There was no doubt he’d been talking to Rio on the phone a moment ago. That had definitely been the Rio Futaba he knew.

And at the same time, Rio was right here in front of him. This was Rio Futaba, too.

“Adolescence Syndrome?” Mai asked.

“.....” Rio stared at her feet. “I hate to admit it, but...,” she said.

“You have a hunch why?”

“If I did, I’d have handled it.”

“I guess you would, yeah.”

There was something else he wasn't clear on. Her hair was down. She had her glasses on. When he'd met her that afternoon, she'd looked different.

“When I met you earlier today...that was the other Rio?”

“I don't remember seeing you, so probably.”

“Okay...”

“That fake's a real pain. She's taken over my home, so I can't go back there. I really don't want my parents knowing about this.”

“Right.”

Who could handle having their daughter doubled?

“The fake is also really into club activities. She's going to classes and everything.”

“She was in uniform this afternoon. Said she was on her way to the Science Club.”

“Being outside sounds riskier by the minute. If anyone I know sees me, there'll be no end to it. I'm gonna have to hide.”

“Hence the Internet café? Isn't there any place better?”

“I don't have the money to stay at a hotel.”

Especially if there was no telling how long this would go on.

“You're a dumbass,” he said.

“That *really* hurts coming from you.”

“Why didn't you just call *me*?”

“.....”

When Rio realized Sakuta was genuinely mad at her, her wry smile faded.

“Think about it,” he said. “You're a high school girl. Staying in an Internet café? That's insane.”

The cubicle doors might have locks, but that was no guarantee of safety. A

guy might be able to get away with it, but a girl could well find herself in real trouble.

There were people out there who targeted runaway girls. Whatever her reasons for it, Rio was being seriously reckless.

And the staff would have noticed how young she was before too long. It would've been impossible to go on like this. The moment someone talked to the police and got in touch with her parents, she'd be doomed.

"....."

Rio just hung her head, saying nothing.

"Look, Futaba... Ow!"

Before Sakuta could say anything else, Mai jabbed him in the ribs.

"Mai, I'm sorry if you're bored because I'm not paying attention to you, but this is important... Ow, ow, ow!"

Now she was yanking on his ear.

"She can't just call you, can she?" Her eyes said he was being totally clueless. "You're being totally clueless." She said it out loud, too.

"Er, why not?"

"Imagine Futaba contacted you and explained the situation. What then?"

"I'd have her stay with me."

"You're a guy, though."

"Well, yeah, but..."

"Futaba knows you pretty well, but you want her to call up a boy knowing he'll try to get her to stay over?"

"I really don't see why not," he said, being completely honest.

Mai let out a long sigh. "Men," she said.

"Sorry."

"Sakuta," she said in the same disgusted tone.

“But, I mean, Futaba’s my friend? I’m not trying to put a move on her.”

“Ohhh, so if a high school girl was in your apartment right after taking a bath, you wouldn’t be even slightly turned on?”

“No, I definitely would be.”

“*That* you get right away.” She flicked his forehead.

“I mean, you put the image of a girl wrapped in a bath towel in my head. Don’t blame me.”

“I didn’t tell you to imagine anything!”

There was a smile on Mai’s lips, but not in her eyes.

“.....”

Rio was also glaring at him.

“Obviously, I was imagining Mai in that bath towel,” he insisted.

“Then okay.”

“That makes it okay?”

Mai ignored his last quip and turned toward Rio.

“But now that it’s all out there, maybe it’s time to accept his help?” she suggested. There was no strong-arming nor gush of sympathy. Mai simply approached the situation like an adult. She was only a year older than Rio, but at times like this, Mai always seemed much older.

“If you stick to your guns here, Sakuta will just think you’re being childish.”

Rio sighed. Maybe that struck a nerve.

She turned toward Sakuta. “Azusagawa,” she said.

“Okay.”

“I haven’t said anything yet.” She smiled, as if the tension had already drained away.

“So, Mai,” he said.

“What?”

“Futaba’s gonna be staying at my place. That okay with you?”

He was just making sure.

But Mai said, “Of course not.”

“Huh?”

He was totally lost now. Mai had just talked Rio into asking to stay with him, so why did it sound like she was trying to stop that from happening now?

“Did that come as a surprise?”

“Why would it not be?”

He really didn’t get it.

“Are you really that clueless?”

She looked at him like he was a total idiot. He probably was being an idiot.

“Think about it this way. If I had a guy friend staying over at my place, would you be okay with it?”

“I don’t even want to imagine it.”

“See?”

“Yeah, okay, point taken.”

But then what should they do with Rio? He folded his arms, thinking.

With a teasing smile, Mai said, “So I’ll just have to stay over, too.”

“Huh?”

“Come on, let’s get Futaba’s things.”

Without waiting for a response, Mai turned back toward the Internet café. Sakuta and Rio glanced at each other once, then followed her.

“You two seem to be doing well,” Rio said, as if this was unexpected.

“Your eyes say you think I’m totally whipped.”

“Well done, Azusagawa, you got it in one.”

“Being a little whipped is the secret to a successful relationship.”

“Now you’re just making excuses. Once a rascal, always a rascal.”

“I’d let Mai whip me anytime.”

“.....”

Sakuta followed after Mai, ignoring Rio’s look of infinite scorn.

4

Back at home, Kaede came out to greet him, looking sleepy. Sakuta quickly explained the situation. He avoided mentioning Adolescence Syndrome but had to convince her to let Mai and Rio stay over.

“You brought yet *another* new girl over...”

“Phrasing, please.”

“B-but I’m your sister, so I accept that about you!”

Kaede was definitely nervous at first, but she stopped being afraid of Rio pretty quickly. Rio’s low-key calm may have helped. And Mai had come over often enough that Kaede was used to her, which probably played a big part as well.

With Kaede on board, they just had to decide the order for baths. Kaede had already taken hers, so they had to figure it out for the remaining three.

“I’ll go last,” he said, purely out of the kindness of his heart.

Mai and Rio both looked disgusted.

“I might get pregnant.”

“How would that work, Mai?”

“I’m going to take my luggage home and take a bath there. I’ll pick up a change of clothes while I’m at it.”

And with that, Mai left.

“So go on ahead, Azusagawa.”

“Ah, I get it. You think I’m a pervert who gets off on used schoolgirl bathwater.”

He decided this wasn't a fight worth having and took his bath first.

When he emerged ten minutes later, he found Rio sitting quietly in the living room like a borrowed cat. She took her turn with the bath.

A few minutes later, he realized he'd forgotten to fetch an extra towel for her. He grabbed a clean one from the laundry and took it to the changing room.

"Futaba," he called. There was a splash.

"Wh-what?"

She sounded unusually flustered. Her voice cracked. Like she'd jumped into the water to hide. Did she think he'd actually open the door? No trust.

"I brought you a towel."

"Okay."

"You have a change of clothes?"

There had been a large tote bag among her belongings they'd collected from the Internet café.

"Yes."

"Well, if you don't, I could loan you a bunny-girl outfit or some panda pajamas."

"I just said I do."

He'd figured the bunny-girl outfit wasn't in the cards, but Kaede had several extra panda pajamas, and he definitely wanted to see her in one if he could manage.

"Should I wash the clothes you had on?"

Sakuta and Kaede's laundry was already in the washing machine. He threw Rio's T-shirt in with them and hit the switch.

Water rushed in, and the washing machine began feverishly doing its job.

"I can do my own— Wwt?"

"It's filling up."

"E-even my underwear?"

“Mm? Are you one of those girls who don’t want their laundry in the same load as Daddy’s underwear?”

Unfortunately, Sakuta’s underwear was in that load, too.

“I’m asking about my underwear!”

“You want me to wash them by hand, right? Got it.”

The bra and panties she’d been wearing a few minutes before were in the laundry basket. Thin, soft-looking, light-yellow cloth. He reached for them.

“You don’t got it! Don’t look! Don’t touch! Just get out!”

“This is my house.”

“Get out of the changing room!”

“You sure you’re okay?”

“I will be once you’re gone!”

“Down we go.”

He abandoned the idea of grabbing her underwear and settled on the ground, leaning his back against the washing machine.

“Why are you sitting down out there?”

“By *okay*, I meant the Adolescence Syndrome.”

He was pretty sure she’d gotten that.

“.....” Her silence was a sign he was right. “...I dunno,” she said after a while.

She sounded insecure. Reluctant to talk.

“That it?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Just whatever’s on your mind.”

It wasn’t happening to him, and even he was upset by it. There had to be something on her mind.

“...I’m a little scared,” she said. He could hear her shifting in the water.

“Just a little?”

“When I was alone at the Internet café, I was *really* scared.”

There was a quiver in her voice as she remembered it.

There were two of her.

That was a kind of fear nobody else had ever experienced. How could she not be terrified?

“But is this even possible?” he asked. “How can there be two of the same person?”

Sakuta remembered there being a popular urban legend along those lines when he was a kid. Stories about doppelgängers who looked just like you. If you ever met them, you’d die—pretty much your archetypal urban legend.

But the current situation made that seem a lot less funny.

“If quantum teleportation is feasible on a macro level, it might be possible.”

“Every time you say the word *quantum*, my face goes numb.”

“What about teleportation?”

“That belongs in sci-fi movies.”

“I’m talking about the real world.”

“Seriously?”

In his mind, teleportation was 100 percent in the realm of fiction.

“We’ve talked about quantum entanglement before, right?”

“Uh, something about how particles in separate places sync up?”

He vaguely remembered that two particles in that state were able to share information instantaneously.

“Yes. If we interpret my current situation on the same basis as simply as possible... For example, we can assume there is a blueprint detailing my composition and construction.”

“That’s supposed to be simple?”

They’d only just reached the starting line, and already Sakuta was getting lost.

“The information in that blueprint is instantly moving to a different location under the principle of quantum entanglement.”

“So even though you’re in my bath right now, that information is being sent to the school?”

“Basically. Through the act of observation, the information composing the version of me at school is converted from a probabilistic existence into a Rio Futaba you’re able to perceive.”

“The Theory of Observation again.”

“You remembered that? Impressive.”

“We’ve been over it enough times.”

In quantum terms, it was the act of observation that determined the locations of matter. Before observation, they only existed in terms of probability...if he remembered right.

But his understanding of it was all surface level. He had no illusions that he truly knew what that all meant. And now that concept involved teleportation, somehow. As far as he was concerned, this was like being told magic is real.

“But the way you describe it, isn’t it impossible for you both to exist simultaneously?”

It was called quantum teleportation, not duplication, after all.

“Right, but...I didn’t explain that yet, so I’m shocked you got it.”

“Once observed, it isn’t probabilistic, but that doesn’t mean you both exist. While you’re in our bath, you aren’t at the school. That’s how it works, right?”

“Astonishing. You really do get it.”

“I have a good teacher.”

“Well, you’re right. Moreover, I haven’t personally seen the other me, either.”

“Huh?”

“So if you ask me if we exist simultaneously, I can’t say we do or don’t with any certainty. But I am sure there’s some version of me that exists somewhere else and is doing different things. From the state of my room and my phone

usage history, there was evidence of all sorts of changes and actions I haven't experienced."

"So as long as I'm observing you, the other Rio can't exist?"

"If the observer who gives me form is you, Azusagawa, then that is correct. Maybe the best way to describe it is...as long as one is being observed, that observer can't observe the other one."

"Uh...you lost me."

"I'm assuming there are multiple perspectives involved. Right now, for instance... Sakurajima went home, but what if she ran into the fake me outside?"

"Okay."

"If Sakurajima brought the fake back here, it's possible the fake she brought back would not exist in the world that you and I perceive. Meanwhile, in the world Sakurajima sees, I might not exist."

"...That's pretty nuts."

That was an understatement.

"Yes. And that would generate a paradox, since the worlds you and Sakurajima perceive would not match up."

"But when we met you at the Internet café, I was on the phone with the other you, even as you were standing right in front of me."

"Was it really me on the phone?"

That sounded significant.

"It was you."

"You're sure?"

"Well...it's not like I actually *saw* you."

"Which means we could say, 'It was someone extremely like me, but we can't be sure it was.' There are elements of uncertainty where the 'me' on the phone is concerned."

“Is that how you could exist at the same time?”

“This is pure conjecture, and merely one possibility. The fact that I haven’t encountered the fake might just be a coincidence. There is still the distinct possibility that other people could observe us both simultaneously.”

“But ultimately, that means you can’t just walk around, huh?”

It would be bad if anyone from Minegahara saw two Rios. That would be a lot to explain, and pretending they were twins might not cut it.

“Uh, but wait, if this is quantum teleportation and the information you’re made from is the same, then no matter which one of you assumes a physical state due to observation, wouldn’t your consciousness and memories be identical?”

Only position was determined by observation. That shouldn’t cause any change in the information that made up Rio Futaba. If they were operating with different minds and memories, didn’t that imply there were two distinct beings, each calling themselves Rio Futaba?

“This is just a hypothesis...,” Rio said and then broke off.

In the silence that followed, the washing machine sounded very loud.

“Futaba?” he asked.

“If I... If the one observing ‘Rio Futaba’ was myself... If it was my consciousness observing me and there was some reason why there were two of us, then that might explain the current situation.”

“Like...two personalities?”

“I don’t think it’s that clearly differentiated.”

“Well, assuming you’re right...why would that happen?”

“I said I don’t have any idea.”

“Like...some sort of a shock, or a major source of stress?”

“You sure seem to have something in mind. To be fair, I’ve also heard things like that can interfere with your mind and memories.”

Sakuta had witnessed something similar two years ago. The enormous stress

that resulted from Kaede's bullying had taken its toll on someone close to him.

"Yeah, bit of history there..."

"...Your mother?"

Rio clearly hesitated before asking. He'd told her his mother hadn't taken the incident well and had been in the hospital ever since.

"Basically."

"Sorry."

"It's fine. I brought it up."

"Mm... So, Azusagawa..."

"Mm?"

"I'd like to get out now. I'm feeling light-headed."

"Okay," Sakuta said, except he didn't move.

"I'm telling you to get out," she growled.

Her voice echoed through the bathroom, doubling the grump.

Sakuta stood up. "I'll leave, but you can stay here as long as you need to."

"...Sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

That fact that she didn't just say "Thanks" was very Rio, he thought. He left the changing room and closed the door behind him.

As he did, the intercom buzzed. Mai was back.

"Coming!"

Once Rio was out of the bath, it was time to discuss who was sleeping where.

Sakuta and Kaede lived in a two-bedroom apartment. There were only the two beds—one in Sakuta's room, and one in Kaede's. They had a set of extra bedding in case of company, so there was enough for three people.

"Then I think Mai and Futaba should use your room, and you should sleep with me."

“Never.”

He rejected Kaede’s proposal out of hand. In the end, Kaede slept in her own room, Mai and Rio took over Sakuta’s room with the extra futon, and Sakuta was left sprawled out in the living room. This was the logical conclusion—and pretty much the only practical choice they had.

“Good night.”

The doors to both rooms closed; Sakuta turned off the living room lights and hunkered down in the space in front of the TV.

The LED lights on the ceiling were still glowing faintly. He could hear the hum of the refrigerator in the silence.

He closed his eyes but didn’t fall asleep.

After a while, he heard a door open. Based on where the sound came from, it was likely the one that led to his room.

He assumed the footsteps were headed for the toilet, but they came toward the living room and stopped next to him.

Then he heard someone lie down.

Rio would definitely never do this. So he assumed it must be Mai, and he opened his eyes.

Lying on her side right in front of him was, indeed, Mai with her lovely face. Even in the dim light, he could clearly make out the shape of it, and she seemed like she was enjoying herself.

“Mai.”

“Mm?” She even sounded like she was having fun.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking at your face.”

“I know that, but...”

“Looking at my boyfriend’s face, then.”

“.....”

That was hardly fair. His heart was racing now. How would he ever sleep?

“Heart skip a beat?” she asked, teasing him.

“You’re having fun?”

“Of course I am. Not only do I get to spend time with you again, I’m staying over.”

That was definitely an act. She was clearly messing with him. Then she looked displeased, and before he knew it, she’d reached out and pinched his nose.

“And Futaba?” he asked, his voice muffled.

“Sound asleep. It’s probably been a few days since she could sleep in peace, I imagine.”

“Right.”

Sleeping in an Internet café would fry any girl’s nerves. And Rio tended to stress that stuff more than most.

“I’m right in front of you, but you’re thinking about Futaba.”

“You seemed like you were mad, so I thought it would be safer to talk about something serious.”

In the process, he ended up stepping on another land mine, though.

“And to think I took the whole day off tomorrow,” she said, turning away from him. She let go of his nose. “All so we could actually have a date.”

“Is that why you came back early?”

“.....”

Mai neither confirmed nor denied this. She just shot him a disgruntled look. That convinced Sakuta that he was right.

“Wait, why are you wording it like we can’t anymore?”

“Because you’ll be looking into the thing with Futaba.” Mai had a point.

“I mean, the ‘fake’ will probably be at the Science Club tomorrow, so yeah, I was gonna drop in on her.”

There was no point trying to hide it. Nothing could start without verifying if

there were two Rio Futabas or not.

“See? I knew it.”

“Actually, about that. I have a favor to ask you.”

“No,” she said, before he could even finish asking. “You just want me to watch the ‘real’ Futaba while you’re visiting the ‘fake’ one, right?”

“You know me well.”

The quickest way to check would be to have the real Rio come to school and stand next to the fake one, but that was risky. If someone else spotted them together, it could turn out badly. Cause a panic.

Rio’s hypothesis also suggested it was impossible to see them both at once.

Plus, he was a little worried about the doppelgänger legend. All in all, it was probably best to keep the two Rios separate until they knew more.

“Don’t sound so pleased,” Mai said, twisting his cheek.

“Ow, ow.”

“Don’t *sound so pleased*,” she said.

“But can you help?”

“.....” Mai wordlessly let go of his cheek, glaring. “Then my debt to you is canceled.”

“You mean...the one for ignoring me for weeks?”

“Right.”

“Aw.”

“This fulfills that obligation.”

“If you help me here, I’ll do anything you like. So I’d prefer you pay me back as promised.”

“I’m already lying on the floor with you.”

“I was hoping it would be something more French.”

“.....” Mai looked exasperated.

“Was that too roundabout?”

Of course not. Mai was acting that way precisely because she knew exactly what he meant. Lying this close to each other, *French* could only mean French kissing.

“You don’t need to leverage a debt for that. Choose the right time, place, and mood, and I might just let you.”

There was an impish look in her eye for most of this, but toward the end, she got embarrassed and looked away.

“Mai?”

“Wh-what?”

She steeled herself and met his eye again.

Was that a signal to go ahead? He thought it was. Even if it wasn’t, she’d only yell at him for it. And by this point, he considered that its own reward, so why hesitate?

“.....”

“.....”

Their eyes locked together.

One second. Two. Three seconds passed, and Mai’s eyelashes fluttered, her eyes closing.

Sakuta leaned in to kiss her. Just as he did, Mai tilted her head downward, looking flustered. This meant their foreheads bumped before their lips could touch. There was a dull *thunk*.

“That hurt,” she said, glaring at him.

“Because you got all embarrassed and looked down.”

“B-because you came on too strong!”

She sat up.

“Mai?”

“That’s enough for today.”

He couldn't make out her expression well in the dark, but he was pretty sure she was blushing.

"Aww."

Putting things on hold when they'd come this far? Downright painful.

"Because you're terrible at this."

"Ugh, that hurts! I've lost all confidence! I'm scared of women now!"

"*That*ll never happen."

She seemed awfully certain.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I'll let you practice as much as you need until you can do it properly."

"...Mai."

"What? You don't want to?"

"I love you so much."

"I know."

She sounded annoyed, but before she turned away, he caught a smile on her lips.

"Night," she said and stood up.

"Good night."

Mai waved to him as she went back to his room. When he heard the door close, Sakuta shut his eyes.

He still couldn't sleep. Everything Mai had said and done had left him far too worked up.

But that wasn't the only thing on his mind.

He kept thinking about Rio. The Rio who'd given him advice that afternoon. The Rio asleep in his bedroom. The two Rios.

The Rio sleeping in his bedroom had called the other one a "fake." If he'd

been able to accept that, maybe this wouldn't be so upsetting.

But Sakuta had his own take on the matter.

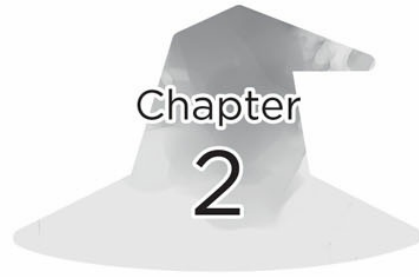
*They're **both** Rio Futaba.*

If only one was real, they just had to get rid of the fake. But this didn't feel that simple. And that was keeping him awake.

Still...even if both of them *were* real, having two of them was a problem. Her family, their school, and the world they lived in were not prepared to accept *two* Rio Futabas. That reality was only too palpable.

So how could he calm down?

“Argh, dammit! Only cure is to think about Mai's bunny-girl outfit!”



youth is a paradox

1

He was looking at the sea.

Sitting on the stairs to the beach, Sakuta from two years ago was absently watching the waves roll in.

He'd dreamed about the beach at Shichirigahama over and over, so even in his sleep, Sakuta knew he was dreaming.

And he knew what would happen next.

Shouko would be here soon.

"You're all depressed again, Sakuta," she said, bounding down the stairs. She sat next to him.

"You're being obnoxious again, Shouko."

"The turmoil in a boy's heart won't be healed by staring at the ocean every day."

"If only I'd never known how close the horizon is."

What he'd thought was so far away turned out to be only three miles. Perhaps the lesson was that no matter how far off things seemed, they were really close at hand.

"Oh dear. I guess that's *my* fault. What would make you feel better? I'm up for helping any way I can."

She leaned forward, peering into his face. As she did, her glossy hair spilled over her shoulder. When she tilted her head like that, it was really cute.

"If you let me touch your boobs, I'm sure I'll feel better," he said, for the sake of saying something.

"Would that actually help?" She seemed to doubt it.

"Definitely."

"But...they're not that big, you know?" she admitted, looking insecure.

"....."

He turned and looked at her. Shouko started blushing.

“...I-if it’s only a little bit, then—”

“I was joking. You shouldn’t take it seriously,” he said, backing off before she actually offered to let him grope her.

“I *knew* it was a joke.”

“Did you?”

“But if it would actually help, I’d consider it,” she said, with the grin of a sister teasing a little brother.

“Bold talk for someone your size.”

“Oh, you’re gonna go there?” Shouko stood up and moved around behind him. “Ha!” she said as she put her arms around him.

One arm over each shoulder, chest pressed up against his back. Every nerve in his body instantly focused on that sensation.

“Shouko.”

“What?”

“They’re bigger than I thought.”

“Right? Right?” She sounded pleased.

“You know, comparatively.”

“I can feel your heart racing, you snot.”

“And I can feel yours.”

But Shouko didn’t let him go. She sat there hanging on to him, watching the waves, talking about nothing in particular. An aimless conversation. The warmth of her body against his making him feel safe. He couldn’t remember what led them to talk about it—he felt like it had just come up naturally.

“You feel guilty because you couldn’t save your sister, Sakuta.”

“...Is that wrong?”

“Not wrong, no. But seeing you depressed like this must make it hard for her. If she thinks it’s her fault you’re not smiling anymore, that would be really sad.”

“It’s not her fault she got bullied.”

“Even so.”

“.....”

“Feeling sorry is really important, that’s true. But however important it is, having apologies forced on you can get really oppressive.”

“Then what should I do?”

“What would you like to hear?”

“.....”

“Do you like being told ‘I’m sorry’?”

“No.”

“I don’t like it, either. ‘Thank you’ or ‘Good job’ or ‘I love you’ are all much better. Those three are my favorites.”

Her arms tightened around him. Squeezing. It hurt a bit but also felt nice. Warm.

“Good job, Sakuta,” she whispered.

“?!” His heart leaped into his mouth.

“You did everything you could for her.”

“.....”

He felt a burning sensation behind his nose. *Crap*, he thought, but too late. He blinked once, and the tears started flowing.

He’d had no one to rely on. No one had stepped up to help him. All he could do was watch helplessly as Adolescence Syndrome covered Kaede’s body in wounds. No matter how much he wanted to help, there’d been nothing he could do. He couldn’t even find anyone who believed this crazy stuff was happening to her.

He’d worn his throat out explaining, but no one listened. His parents couldn’t accept it; the teachers at her school just covered their own asses; their friends stopped coming over. The more desperate he got, the more everyone else

distanced themselves. They acted like it was his fault for not reading the air. That was excruciating. It was beyond unbearable. And he'd had no choice but to suffer through it.

"I..."

"You did great, Sakuta."

This released the flood of emotions he'd kept bottled up. The tears wouldn't stop coming. He'd thought no one would ever understand, but he'd finally found someone who did. Someone who got it. And that made all the difference. That was all it took to save him.

"Shouko, I..."

He let the emotions take him and tried to turn toward her. But he failed. Something was holding both his cheeks, and he couldn't move his head at all...

The pressure on his face woke him up.

His right cheek was hot. So was his left. They were throbbing like someone had slapped him.

The pain opened his eyes, and he saw Mai looking down at him, her face upside down.

"....."

She looked cross. That was too bad, since she looked great in the apron she had on. She was upside down because she was crouched at his head, where he lay on his back.

Mai's hands were on either side of his face.

"Sorry," he said, lips smooshed like an octopus in a vise.

"For what?"

"Um..."

He could think of one reason. He might have called out the wrong name in his sleep.

"Can I ask the reason for this?" he asked carefully.

“I’m staying under the same roof as you, but you were sound asleep, which is infuriating,” Mai said. But her eyes shifted to one side. She was lying.

“Can I assume you were too excited about staying in your boyfriend’s apartment and couldn’t sleep?”

“Sleeping in the apartment of a *younger* boyfriend is honestly not that big a deal.”

She was trying real hard to act natural, but before she even got the whole sentence out, she was interrupted by a tiny yawn. Before, when they’d shared a bed at a business hotel in Ogaki, she’d slept like a log even with him next to her... What had changed? Was she more self-conscious about him now? No, maybe she was just worn out from filming that show in Kyoto. He decided to be optimistic and go with the first theory.

“Don’t leap to any conclusions, Sakuta.”

“How’d you know?”

“It was written on your face.”

“That I thought you were being supercute?”

“Don’t get smart with me.”

She clapped his cheeks again. It was quite loud.

“I made breakfast, so go wash up.”

He lifted his head and saw French toast and scrambled eggs on the table.

“I helped myself to the contents of your fridge,” she said.

“Consider this your house.”

“Stop messing around and get up already.”

“Here we go.”

He pretended he was getting up but then rested his head on her thighs instead. The world-famous lap pillow. But it wasn’t quite right. Mai was on her knees, but her hips weren’t on her heels, so her lap was at an awkward angle.

“Mai, my neck hurts.”

“You have only yourself to blame.”

But she didn't try to push him off. It was a quiet moment of bliss.

“Ah!”

Then a gasp of surprise interrupted it. Kaede had woken up and come out of her room.

“Oh, Kaede,” Sakuta said. “Morn— Yikes!”

Halfway through, Mai had jumped to her feet. Sakuta's head bounced off the floor.

“.....?!”



It hurt too much to even yelp. He just lay there silently rubbing it.

“Morning, Kaede,” Mai said, completely ignoring what she’d done to him. This convinced him that he *had* called out Shouko’s name in his sleep. Mai’s pride stopped her from saying so—she couldn’t admit Shouko’s existence got to her.

“M-morning! I didn’t see anything!!”

When Sakuta finally managed to right himself, he found Kaede covering her face with both hands and fidgeting.

“I’ll never see anything again! My future is shrouded in darkness!”

“That’s what happens when you cover your face like that.”

“I can’t see tomorrow!”

“Such is life.”

“A play without a script, I see.”

“You people sure have a lot of excitement in the morning,” Rio said as she emerged from the washroom. She put her glasses on, unease written across her face. It was obvious she was doubtful that she could keep up with this kind of energy.

Everyone sat down to the breakfast Mai had made.

This was the first time since the Azusagawa siblings moved in that all four seats at the table were filled.

It had taken Kaede a few minutes to sit with them, but now she was happily eating French toast next to Sakuta. Right next to him. It was kinda hard to eat.

“This is so good! And fluffy!”

“The eggs are also pretty good.”

“They’re fluffy, too!”

“We should have Mai cook for us all the time.”

“Yes!” Kaede said, nodding enthusiastically.

“Don’t weaponize Kaede,” Mai said, stomping his foot.

“Ow!”

“What’s wrong?” Kaede asked.

“My love is being tested.”

Mai started grinding.

Kaede looked baffled. Meanwhile, Rio’s hands had noticeably stopped moving.

“You don’t like it, Futaba?” Mai asked.

“Oh, no...,” Rio said and took another bite. “I just haven’t eaten breakfast with anyone in a while.”

Come to think of it, Rio was always eating toast in the science lab at school. Washing it down with the physics teacher’s supply of instant coffee... Did she not eat breakfast with her family?

He opened his mouth to ask but was interrupted by a vibration. The sound was faint enough he had to listen close to be sure he’d heard it. But Sakuta soon realized it was a phone ringing. Because he saw Kaede flinch.

“Oh, sorry, that’s me,” Mai said, pulling her bunny-eared phone out of her apron pocket. “I’ll be right back. It’s my manager.”

She got up and went out onto the veranda, holding the phone to her ear.

“Yes?” she said, her tone and attitude suddenly very grown-up.

“Hi, Mai?”

Either her manager’s voice was very loud or she had it on speaker. Sakuta could hear every word.

“What’s up?”

“Sorry to call this early. This a good time?”

“It’s fine.”

“I’m sure you’re tired after that shoot... Are you outside?”

The noise from the street below must have made that obvious.

“I’m at my boyfriend’s,” Mai said, like it was no big deal. This made it sound

like she'd already told her manager about him, but...

"Oh, your boy— Wait, what?!" Apparently, this was the first time Mai had mentioned it. "D-did you just...boy...? You said *boyfriend*?"

"I did," Mai said, as calm as her manager was flustered.

"Don't you move! I'll go talk to the boss...and I'll stop by your place later!"

She must have hung up, because Mai came back inside.

"That's handled," she said and shut her phone off completely.

She sat back down and turned to Kaede, placing her palms together. "Sorry, Kaede," she said.

"I-I'm fine! I just shudder involuntarily whenever I hear that noise."

"Are *you* fine, Mai?"

"I might get a lecture from the head of my agency later. It'll be all your fault."

"....."

"I'm kidding."

She grinned like it really didn't matter and took a bit of French toast. "Pretty good," she said, pleased with her own work. It was actually very good. He hadn't been exaggerating when he said it would be great if she cooked like this every day.

"I can't tell if you're joking or not when it comes to work problems," he said.

"Boyfriends are fine."

"You say that but your...manager? They seemed pretty rattled."

"We just signed a commercial deal, so the agency is wary of scandals. At most they'll tell us not to get spotted outside together for a bit."

"I dunno if that qualifies as 'fine.'"

That made him worried they'd pressure her into dumping him.

"Also, my manager is pretty much always rattled."

"That really doesn't sound good, either."

From what he knew, managers were in charge of handling their client's work arrangements and schedule. That would seem to require a level head. And she'd called Mai but hung up without ever stating the reason for the call...and Mai had turned her phone off for Kaede's benefit. If the manager tried to call back and couldn't get through, she'd be even more agitated.

But there was no use in his worrying about any of that, so Sakuta elected to enjoy his breakfast.

Shouko came over at ten, like clockwork. Today she had on a hat with a huge brim. The kind rich girls wear when they wander the grounds of a resort.

"My mom made me wear this because it's so sunny," she explained when she saw him staring. Then she noticed the shoes. "Um, you have company?"

"Yeah, it's, uh...a long story. Don't worry. Come on in."

Shouko took off her shoes, and he led her into the living room. Mai, Rio, and Kaede were all there.

"You know a lot of girls, Sakuta."

"....."

"I didn't mean anything by that," Shouko said, waving her hands. "I didn't—really," she said again.

He hadn't uttered a word, so this made it sound like she *definitely* meant something by it.

"What, did you think I'm a philanderer or something?"

"No, I just thought you were more of a maharaja than I thought."

That did not sound substantially better. Before she could leap to any more conclusions, Sakuta introduced Rio. Mai had been with him the day they took Hayate in, so Shouko already knew her.

"This is Rio Futaba. She goes to school with me."

"I'm Shouko Makinohara," Shouko said, bowing.

Rio looked rather tense. She shot Sakuta a glance. He gave her a quick nod but left it at that. It was the other Rio he'd recently asked about Shouko, so this

one still didn't know about her. Obviously, she was pretty shocked.

Since he'd already asked "Rio" about her once, it hadn't occurred to him to bring it up. Maybe he should have.

He quickly filled her in while Shouko was playing with Hayate.

"Adolescence Syndrome sure does love you, Azusagawa."

The feeling wasn't mutual.

After that, as promised, Sakuta and Shouko gave Nasuno a bath. He had Shouko pick Nasuno up and carry her into the bathroom. She was almost skipping. Hayate followed them but stopped at the door to the bathroom, hackles raised.

Sakuta filled the sink with lukewarm water. When he glanced at Shouko, she lowered Nasuno into the basin. The cat was relaxed, sitting calmly. Sakuta picked up a small bucket and scooped water onto the parts of her that were sticking out. Nasuno closed her eyes, enjoying it.

Then it was time for shampoo.

"Work it in slowly. Don't go against the fur."

"Okay."

Shouko's tiny hands slowly started rubbing, making sure to get every inch. Then they rinsed it all off.

"Aaaand we're done."

Nasuno mewed in response and left the sink, dropping to the floor. She stopped right in front of Shouko.

"Uh-oh."

"Huh?"

Before Sakuta could warn her, Nasuno shook herself, sending drops of water everywhere.

"Eep!"

Shouko fell over backward on the wet floor. She was still holding the running

shower head in one hand, so she ended up spraying herself.

“Augh! Aughhh!”

Surprised by the sudden water spray, Shouko dropped the showerhead. The water pressure made it writhe like a snake, mercilessly drenching every inch of her.

“Whaaa...?”

Sakuta quickly turned the shower off.

But it was too late.

Shouko was soaked from head to toe. Her thin summer dress was plastered to her skin, and he could clearly see underwear and bare skin through it.

Nasuno calmly strolled out into the hall still wet, so he couldn't very well leave her be.

“Kaede! Nasuno's headed your way! Get the dryer!”

Then he held out his hand and helped Shouko up. She was astonishingly light.

He led her out into the changing room, where he grabbed a towel and started drying her hair.

“I'm okay. I can do it myself.”

“Oh, right.”

She wasn't exactly a little kid.

“I'll grab you a change of clothes, so get out of those wet things before you catch a cold.”

“Okay.”

Shouko reached for the buttons on her chest. But the damp made the fabric stiff, and she was clearly struggling.

“Let me,” Sakuta said.

Shouko let him take over. Her outfit was very uncooperative. But he managed to get two of the buttons undone.

The front of the dress came open, and he could see the white camisole she

had under it. That was wet, too, and he could see skin through it.

He was about to undo one more button so she could get the dress off. Then he sensed someone behind him.

“Sakuta, what are you doing?”

Mai was standing in the door to the changing room.

“Taking Makinohara’s clothes off.”

“You have the nerve to admit it?”

She seemed pretty mad.

“Huh? Wait, do I look like a pervert about to molest this young girl?”

“Absolutely.”

“Don’t be silly, Mai; she’s a child.”

She was too young for it to matter.

“She’s still a girl.”

Mai did not seem willing to let this go. They’d just have to agree to disagree. They needed to draw a clear line here.

“Makinohara.”

“Yes?”

Shouko seemed utterly unperturbed by any of this.

“Do you bathe with your father?”

“I did until the third grade.”

“Now?”

“Not now, no.”

A clear answer. And a fair point. She might be younger than him, but she *was* twelve. Not *that* little. Maybe Mai was right.

“Uh, Mai, you’d better take over,” he said, trying to smile his way out of it.

“We’ll talk when I’m done.”

Didn't sound like it had worked.

"I hope it'll be a fun conversation," he said.

"Um, I don't mind, so don't be mad at him," Shouko said, looking up at Mai. The girl radiated purity.

A very welcome show of support. Except it clearly backfired.

"You've sure groomed her well," Mai said, her eyes not smiling at all.

"I've done nothing! She was always like that!"

"Just get out."

Mai shoved Sakuta out the door and slammed it shut behind him.

"Crap, she's *really* mad..."

"I can hear you, stupid."

".....Sorry. Please forgive me."

2

After Mai finished wringing him out, they ate lunch, and Sakuta changed into his uniform so he could swing by school.

It was a ten-minute walk through the sweltering heat to Fujisawa Station. At the heart of a city of forty thousand people. Department stores and electronics shops clustered around. JR, Odakyu, and Enoden—lines by three different companies, all running through it. Throngs of people flowing in and out.

From here, it was a leisurely fifteen-minute ride on a Kamakura-bound train, headed southeast. Sakuta got off at the Enoden Shichirigahama Station, a dinky little place with only a single track running through it.

Once through the station gates, he was greeted by the salty scent of the sea breeze. He'd assumed he'd get used to this as time went on, but he still noticed every time he stepped off the train. And he'd started to pick up on how the smell changed in different seasons or weather conditions.

Today, however, he was mostly focused on his own legs. Mai had forced him

to sit on his knees for a very long time, and they still felt funny.

There were no other students on the walk from the station to the school. He did spot a few local surfers with boards on their shoulders—it was definitely summer. A group of students on their way to the beach passed him by, laughing.

The school gate was only open a third of the way, but he slipped through the gap into the school building. He could hear sports teams yelling in the yard. Baseball players chasing a white ball around. The occasional clang of a metal bat hitting a ball.

The summer tournaments were over, and the third-year students had retired. The team was busy rebuilding. Kanagawa had rather a lot of high schools with baseball teams, but only a few would ever stand on the grounds at Koshien. Minegahara had run into a real powerhouse at their second match and were sent home early.

The pinnacles of their sport were a long way off, but that's exactly why they were all furiously working up a sweat trying to reach them.

Putting their admirable efforts behind him, Sakuta moved inside, seeking shade.

"Futaba, you here?" he asked, opening the door to the science lab.

"....."

No response. The room was empty. But there was a half-full coffee cup by the sink used to wash lab equipment.

Seemed like the "fake" had come to school, at least.

Was she in the bathroom? He poked his head out in the hall. The girls' room wasn't that far away. No signs of anyone coming out, though.

Her bag was on the ground below the desk, so she clearly hadn't gone home yet.

He wandered around the lab for a bit, waiting for Rio to come back. It was the size of two regular classrooms. Way too big to hang out in alone. The scattered placement of the chairs were the traces of people who had been in and out. He

could still hear the sports teams yelling outside, but that just made the lab feel even quieter.

The longer he spent here, the more he felt like he was alone in the school.

Like there had been a crowd here moments before, but they'd all vanished—that was the energy this lab gave off.

It was making him anxious. He felt a knot form in his stomach. Did Rio feel like this all the time? Or was it just due to an overactive imagination?

“.....”

Sakuta decided he needed to change things up and cracked open a window.

A warm breeze trickled in, and the voices outside grew louder. He poked his head out, quickly noticing the intensity emanating from the gym. He saw students in T-shirts and basketball team uniforms milling around outside. There were several uniform colors—students from other schools.

“Oh yeah, Kunimi said they had practice matches today.”

He'd mentioned it at work yesterday. Players from several local high schools were supposed to be participating.

Sakuta didn't need two guesses to know where Rio must be.

He went back to the entrance, changed into his shoes, and made his way to the gym. As he got closer, he could hear the basketball bounding and the sounds of the players running. The squeak of basketball shoes skidding on the gym floor.

The front entrance was blocked by members of other schools' teams, so Sakuta went around the side. The gym cast a huge shadow in this direction. There were a bunch of students sitting in the shade, presumably recovering from their games.

There were three side doors, spaced at even distances, all standing open to let the air in. Sakuta found Rio at the last of these.

“There she is...”

But that thought instantly made him tense.

He'd met this "fake" yesterday, too. They'd talked and everything. She'd offered him advice. He'd sensed absolutely nothing wrong then. But now that he knew there were two Rios, seeing the other one sent a shiver down his spine.

He watched her closely.

Like at the bookstore yesterday, she had her hair up. No white lab coat. Her legs were usually hidden behind the long hem of that coat, but today they were on display. The curve of her thighs. The tightness around the chest of her blouse, pushed upward by the vest she wore over it. All her buttons were done up, even the collar, which made her look very serious—and that clashed a bit with her curves in a way that really drew the eye.

A bunch of the boys were giving her looks. As Sakuta went past, he heard them gossiping.

"She a third-year?"

"Damn sexy. Smart sexy."

"Go talk to her."

"You first."

They seemed to be having fun.

He got why they'd have a dumb conversation like that. With her hair up, she seemed really mature, and it enhanced her sex appeal. And without her glasses, she had a melancholy look, which made you want to call to her.

But Rio only had eyes for one. They were following his every move. She wasn't watching the basketball game. She was watching Yuuma Kunimi.



Her eyes didn't care where the ball went.

"Kunimi playing well?" Sakuta asked, taking his place next to her. Acting normal.

"?!"

Rio jumped a foot in the air.

From behind them, he could hear voices going, "Her boyfriend?" "No way."

Rio glanced at him and immediately turned away. She looked uncomfortable.

"I decided to swing by, since I was already here for club stuff," she said, her voice almost disappearing.

"I didn't say anything."

"You were going to."

"Well, it's always great seeing you embarrassed."

"Drop dead."

"Got too much I wanna do with Mai! Can I have another eighty years?"

"Azusagawa, you think you'll live to your late nineties?"

"Awful people tend to stick around, right?"

"Don't think that's something you want to stake a claim to," Rio said with a sigh.

Her eyes were still locked on Yuuma.

Sakuta checked the score. It was a fairly even match. Minegahara had a three-point lead. And basketball had three pointers, so that gap could close at any time. Even now, a dude in yellow—the opposing team's color—was going for one.

The shot traced a long curve—and bounced off the rim. A tall boy in a white uniform grabbed it. White was Minegahara.

Yuuma was already back toward the opponent's side. He raised a hand. A long pass, on point.

The other team scrambled back, footsteps echoing through the gym.

Yuuma caught the ball and dribbled his way in. A yellow player cut in to defend, and Yuuma tricked them with a dribble under his legs, passing them by. Freed up, he got ready for a jump shot. A big guy leaped in front of him to try to block it. The defender was easily six foot two. But Yuuma's motion was another feint, and his feet never actually left the ground.

Having thrown the other team's defensive timing off, this time he took his shot.

The ball arced smoothly through the air, spinning as it went—and the net swished as it passed through.

A group of girls watching squealed. Must be first-years. Girls from other schools were cheering, too.

"Wow, that's annoying. Horribad."

"You're too uptight, Azusagawa."

"Why don't you try an 'Eek, Kunimi'?"

"....."

She glared at him.

"He'd be so surprised he'd miss a shot," Sakuta declared.

"I'm cheering for him."

"On the inside?"

"....."

Silence signaled agreement.

"You lack initiative, Futaba."

Another cheer went up. The other team had scored.

One step forward, one step back. The crowd was really into it.

Only two minutes left.

"So, Futaba..."

“It’d be great if you could stop disturbing me.”

“What do you like about Kunimi?”

He just went right for it.

“He’s your friend, too,” she quipped. “You’re telling me you don’t know what’s good about him?”

“He’s a decent guy. Annoyingly good-natured, and he doesn’t judge people based on hearsay.”

Yuuma knew how to form his own impressions instead of taking other people’s word for it. He’d said his mother taught him that, but Sakuta didn’t think it was something you could be taught. Spending time with people who had bad reputations gave you a bad reputation. That was how the world worked. He totally understood why Saki Kamisato had come after him, demanding he stay away from Yuuma. Not that understanding made it any less unpleasant...

“So I like him as a person. But I’m also straight, so I’m not sure what I see in him is what girls see in him.”

He knew Yuuma was good-looking. He was taller than Sakuta, talented at basketball, a gentle kind of handsome. He’d heard a college girl at work say it was cute how Yuuma’s smile made him look like a little kid. But he couldn’t shake the feeling that Rio’s fixation was for entirely different reasons.

“What good will it do if you know the reason?”

“Nothing in particular. Just curious. It’s a common enough topic for teens, right?”

“Leave that to typical teenagers.”

“So you’re saying you’re special?”

“We aren’t exactly leading normal high school lives,” she said. No emotion in her voice. Eyes never leaving Yuuma.

“Everyone has a right to fall in love. It’s not like driving. You don’t need a license.”

Everyone is allowed to do it. Love exists beyond rights, allowances, and permissions. Hearts move on their own, dragging their owners this way and that. Some people enjoy it; some people get so upset about it they can barely breath.

There was nothing special about it.

“I’ve thought this for a while, Azusagawa, but you’re pretty love-prone.”

“I am?”

“You take the Minegahara entrance exams to follow your first love, then it takes you a full year to get over her, and before you know it...you’re dating a famous person. It’s unnatural.”

“High praise.”

“Clearly, that’s not what I meant.”

“Shame.”

“I’m not praising you, but I do envy how you follow your heart. Most people chicken out. Sincerity, candor, and dedication go against the times.”

She didn’t sound the least bit envious. And he sure didn’t feel envied.

“You care about what’s in fashion, Futaba?”

“Being too candid can permanently change what you have now.”

Naturally, she meant with Yuuma.

“So? What exactly do you see in Kunimi?”

Sakuta was impressed by how easily she’d derailed the topic, but he decided it was time to forcibly steer back to his original question.

“.....”

Rio glared at him again and then let out a long sigh.

She clearly wanted him to take a hint.

“Love talk makes you sigh?”

“That phrase from your lips just gives me chills.”

“I promise I’ll never say it again.”

He was pretty sure he’d never said *love talk* before in his life.

“A chocolate cornet.”

Rio suddenly named a pastry.

“You want me to go buy you one?”

“No. Kunimi gave me one when I forgot my lunch.”

“Oh.”

Minegahara High didn’t have anything like a cafeteria. Pretty much everyone brought their lunch. For those who didn’t, there was a small truck that always rolled up, and the lady in it sold packaged baked goods. A lunchtime-only bakery parked by the school entrance.

There were also convenience stores in the area, so those were theoretically an option, but it was against the rules to leave school grounds, so few people did.

This meant the only way to procure lunch without getting in trouble was the limited-time bakery, and it was always mobbed. A flock of ravenous students descended on it like locusts, devastating her supply.

Once the flood subsided, all that was left were empty cases and a satisfied proprietor.

“First term, my first year...and my first time going to the bakery truck.”

The mob around that truck could be very intimidating. It could be tough for a timid student to shove their way through.

“And Kunimi swept in when you were in trouble?”

“He showed up eating a curry bun, his own spoils of war.”

“The curry bun prince, eh?”

“Just as I was feeling totally overwhelmed, he smiled and said, ‘You look like a girl who likes sweets, Futaba. Am I right?’”

Sakuta could picture it easily. Rio stuck on the fringe of the crowd of pastry-

mad students. Wishing she could buy something but unable to summon the courage to push into the throng. Hanging her head, ready to turn away—and that’s when Yuuma arrived with his usual open smile...

He grasped the origin story, at least.

“Hmm,” Sakuta said, nodding sagely.

“.....”

Rio’s cheeks were slightly flushed, but she didn’t say anything else.

“So then?” he prompted, giving up.

“That’s all,” she said. Back to her usual flat tone.

“I see. That’s all it was.”

“Yep.”

“How much is a chocolate cornet?”

“One hundred thirty yen.”

“You’re awful easy.”

“If you’d given it to me, it wouldn’t have worked.”

“So it *was* the handsome face that did you in.”

“Kunimi was the first person here—besides you—to call me Futaba.”

Last year, Sakuta, Yuuma, and Rio had all been in the same class. Class 1-1. By that time, Rio was already wearing her white lab coat everywhere and stood out like a sore thumb. She hadn’t been able to fit in with any of the girls’ groups, and no guys spoke to her, either. She was left sitting by herself—it was his main image of her from that year. She never tried engaging with anyone else. It became standard for everyone to call her “Professor” or “Lab Coat Girl”—nobody called her by her name. That was Rio Futaba.

“So why not fall for me?”

“I’m even not your type, Sakuta.”

“I’ll admit you’re the type I want as a friend, not as a date.”

Rio smiled a bit at that. “Ultimately, timing was a big factor. I was really at

rock bottom around then.”

“Mm? Was there more going on?”

“Even when there isn’t, sometimes your feelings get away from you. You’ve never felt like that?”

“You might not have realized this, so let me make it clear—you and I are *both* human beings.”

“That *is* a shocking fact.”

“Well, I guess that’s fine, too. So you were depressed, and he was nice, so you started crushing on him?”

“...When you put it that way, it really does makes me sound like a pushover.”

Rio snorted at herself.

Sakuta tried to think of something else to say, but the buzzer rang first. The game was over.

Both teams lined up.

“Good game!” they cried, their voices echoing through the gym.

With practice finished, the sweaty athletes all came spilling out of the gym, yanking off their shirts and yelling, “Let’s head straight to the beach!” Or making a beeline to the faucets and spraying water everywhere.

Hard training had left them all sleekly muscled, and all these schools were near the water, so everyone had rather deep tans.

The first-year girls were watching and squealing, half-embarrassed, half-gleeful. Girls from the upper years were mostly going, “Boys” and rolling their eyes. Yanking shirts off right after a match was definitely something only guys would do.

But the rippling bodies of men did nothing for Sakuta, so he soon lost interest. It was all a bit too rowdy for him.

Rio was averting her eyes, too. But not for the same reason. Her ears were clearly twitching with each new shout from Yuuma’s group, and she was red all the way down her neck.

“You can look if you like,” Sakuta said.

Yuuma had dunked his head under the faucet and was now shaking the water off like a wet dog. Then he grabbed a towel, dried himself off, and put a T-shirt on.

“Aww, he’s dressed now.”

“.....”

Rio glanced toward Sakuta, looking ready to stick a knife in his ribs. Maybe he’d better stop teasing her. If he valued their friendship.

“So? What did you want, Azusagawa?”

“Huh?”

“You don’t love school so much you come in during vacation unless you want something.”

“Yeah, I wish summer vacation could go on forever.”

But only if he could see Mai on a daily basis.

“You think like a grade-schooler,” Rio snorted, then glared until he got to the point.

“All right, I’ll cut to the chase.”

“Go on.”

“Futaba’s at my place.”

“.....” Rio’s eyes wavered. “So that’s why you sounded weird when you called last night,” she muttered.

“What the hell is going on?”

“Why don’t you ask the other me?”

“That was a very casual way to concede that there’s two of you.”

Rio was keeping her tone professional, like this was someone else’s problem. That was how Rio always acted, and the way she’d behaved while they were talking about Yuuma was also what Sakuta expected from her. He hadn’t found a single reason to think she wasn’t actually Rio. How could he call this one a

“fake”?

“What’s the other one think?”

“She raised the possibility of quantum teleportation.”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

Come to think of it, she’d bought a book on the subject yesterday.

“But if that’s the case, the two of us can’t simultaneously exist, and we should have the same thoughts and memories.”

The other Rio had said that, too.

“Yeah, so she said her theory is that this time the observer is ‘Futaba’s consciousness,’ and for some reason, there are two versions of that consciousness.”

Sakuta didn’t know if that was right, but that was how he understood it.

“I see. And what did she say about why there are two consciousnesses?”

“She said she didn’t know.”

“And you believed such an obvious lie?”

“I try not to doubt my friends.”

“You do it all the time. You think I’m a fake right now,” she said, chewing him out.

“I’ll be honest—I did arrive armed with that possibility.”

“You sound like you’ve changed your mind.”

“No matter how I look at you, you’re definitely Futaba. But if you have a hunch what the reason for the dual consciousness thing is, by all means, fill me in.”

“You should ask the other me. She should have some idea.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because I do.”

And if they were both Rio Futaba, they should both know. In fact, this Rio

might be saying that if the other Rio didn't know, then she was likely a fake.

"Well, if the answer's the same for both of you, better just tell me."

Rio's eyes briefly looked behind him. To where Yuuma was.

"I'm going back to the lab," she said and walked away. Like she was fleeing the scene.

"Not gonna talk to Kunimi?" he asked. He'd concluded he would get nowhere asking about Adolescence Syndrome, so he'd decided to reply the way he always did.

"....."

But the only response was silence. She didn't even pause as she went back into the school building. He watched until she was out of sight.

"Futaba always does make it hard to pry anything out of her..."

It was hard to watch at times.

"Something up with Futaba?" asked someone behind him.

He turned around to find Yuuma in a T-shirt and shorts, with a towel on his head. He had a bottle with a blue label in his hand. A two-liter sports drink. Two-thirds of it were gone, and he was busy chugging the rest.

"Ah, I feel alive again!"

"You've been dead this whole time?"

"Almost! But what's going on with her?"

"Nothing. She's just being Futaba."

"Ah."

He was definitely brushing Yuuma off, but Yuuma seemed convinced by his vague explanation. Sakuta couldn't exactly tell him outright there were two Rios. Yuuma would think he'd gone crazy. No...knowing Yuuma, he would probably keep listening until Sakuta convinced him. But Rio likely didn't want him to know.

"She was here, right?"

“You spotted her?”

“Right after the match started.”

“Keep your eyes on the game.”

“It’s easy to spot your friends from the court.”

Yuuma threw the empty bottle at a nearby trash can. Sakuta tried to make it miss with his mind but failed.

“You tried to mess up my shot just now, didn’t you?”

“Do you read minds now?”

“It was all over your face.”

Yuuma rapped him on the head.

“Futaba come to a lot of games?”

“Mm, not sure. Sometimes, when she’s already here for club?”

“Which one is the real reason she comes to school?” Sakuta gave Yuuma a meaningful look.

“You’re really laying it on thick these days,” Yuuma said.

“I won’t have you toying with her heart.”

“Putting it all out there, huh?”

The girls’ teams were starting a game inside the gym.

“I’ll do what I can on that front,” Yuuma said. “So why are *you* here?”

A reasonable question.

“Should I not be?”

“You don’t like school enough to show up during vacation.”

“Futaba said the exact same thing.”

Yuuma thought for a second, then asked, “Something going on with her?”

“What do you mean by *something*?”

“Nothing going on with me, but you’re at school on vacation... What else

could it be?”

That sort of made sense, but...

You had to know Rio and Sakuta pretty well to reach that conclusion.

“Kunimi, Coach wants to go over the match,” a teammate called.

“Okay, coming,” Yuuma said, turning to leave. Then he stopped and looked back. “Let me know if you need my help.”

“Mm?”

“With Futaba.”

“You don’t need to tell me twice. You better come flying no matter how late I call.”

“I can’t fly, so I’ll ride my bike like the wind.”

Yuuma flashed him a grin and went back into the gym.

3

Sakuta left the gym, heading straight for the visitor’s entrance (about thirty yards from the main one). There were offices just inside this entrance, and students rarely came here without a specific reason. And that reason was usually the nurse’s office, two doors down.

This area was super quiet. He took his shoes off and changed into a pair of slippers. Avoiding the office door—the lights inside were off anyway—he went down the hall to the green public phones. He took a handful of ten-yen coins out of his wallet, stacked them up on top of the phone, and dropped one into the slot.

He dialed his home phone number.

It was picked up immediately.

“Azusagawa speaking.”

He knew who that was right away. Mai.

“Mai, can you say that again?”

“Azusagawa speaking.”

The first time her voice had sounded warm, but now it was coldly professional. He could imagine the exasperated look on her face.

“More like you’re a newlywed.”

“I can’t believe you’re this excited about a phone call.”

“Only because it’s you, Mai.”

“That’s not gonna convince me to role-play a newlywed.”

“Come on, no need to get all embarrassed.”

Mai ignored this and asked, “How’s it going on your end?”

He was tempted to push his luck, but he had a finite number of ten-yen coins, so he got down to business. This was why he’d called, after all.

He had to drop another coin in already.

“Futaba was at school.”

“Mm. Futaba was with me here the whole time.”

“She do anything after I left?”

“Mostly helped Kaede with her homework. Futaba’s teaching her science stuff now.”

“That’s good.”

“Kaede’s still keeping her distance, but...”

Mai chuckled. Sakuta pictured Kaede peering around the side of her doorframe and Rio sitting on the couch in the living room, helping her remotely. Kaede was taller than Rio, so that might be pretty funny looking. Kaede was five foot four, while Rio was only just over five feet tall. He could imagine why Mai was laughing.

“And what are you up to?”

“Cleaning your room.” She deliberately made this sound mischievous.

“Aha! So you’ve opened my closet and seen all my underwear.”

“I’ve disposed of all your unseemly belongings.”

“...Seriously?”

“You don’t need that bunny-girl outfit anymore.”

“That’s the second most important thing in the world!”

He clung to the pay phone in desperation.

“The second?”

“The first is you.”

“Suuuure.”

“I meant that for real.”

“Then you don’t need anything else.”

“Huh?”

“I’m all you need, right?”

“.....”

“Am I wrong?” she grumbled.

“No...you’re right,” he croaked.

“Don’t sound so disappointed. I just tidied up. Nothing’s been thrown away.”

“You’re bad for the heart sometimes.”

“On that note, are you an idol person?” Mai suddenly asked.

This came out of nowhere and baffled him.

“Huh? Why?”

“I found a manga magazine with an idol group on the cover. From three months ago.”

“Oh, I just forgot to throw that out. You can go ahead.”

“Okay.”

She took his word for it. But it also sounded like she was thinking about something else.

“Mai?”

“My manager’s due over in ten minutes—mind if I pop out for a bit? Or should I be keeping my eyes on Futaba?”

She lowered her voice a bit so Rio wouldn’t hear.

“If you say those magic words again.”

“Azusagawa speaking.”

Her voice was warm, overflowing with joy. Exactly the newlywed voice he’d wanted.

“Sakuta, you want to marry me?”

“Right now, I just wanna keep dating.”

“If you’d said yes, I’d have been creeped out, but that soft rejection is also weirdly aggravating.”

“Honestly, marriage just doesn’t seem real yet.”

“Hmm.” She seemed unconvinced. “I suppose I agree. I don’t exactly have firsthand experience with happy families.”

This last part sounded more like she was talking to herself. Her parents had divorced when she was little, and apparently she’d mostly lived with her mother. And most recently, they’d had a serious falling out, so they no longer lived together.

“On second thought, I do wanna marry you eventually.”

“Where’d that come from?”

“Let’s make a happy home together.”

“Yeah, yeah. So? You coming back or not?”

“Planning on it. Gotta ask that Futaba a few things.”

“Okay. Then I’ll see you later.”

“Right.”

He waited until she hung up, then put the receiver down.

He put the remaining ten-yen coins back in his wallet and turned to leave.

“Gah!” he said.

Someone was standing right behind him. Maybe four or five yards away.

Yuuma’s girlfriend—Saki Kamisato.

“What’s with *that* reaction?” she asked, hands on her hips.

“.....”

“.....”

Their eyes locked, but neither spoke. Since Sakuta had nothing to say to her, he took this as an excuse to go change into his shoes.

“Hey,” she said, sounding annoyed. Her voice was like the poke of a needle.

He ignored her and finished changing.

“Pretending you can’t hear me is seriously obnoxious,” she said.

He suppressed a sigh and turned back toward her.

“Sorry about that. Never in all my wildest dreams did I think Saki Kamisato, supposedly the cutest girl in class, would want to talk to an outcast like me. Wow, am I ever surprised.”

He kept his voice super flat, making sure she knew how he felt.

“Ugh, you’re such an asshole.”

She acted like she was peering into a dumpster. It was quite insulting. If anyone was gonna look at him that way, it should be Mai. That would’ve been a reward, but with Saki, it just sucked.

“I realize.”

That’s why he’d said it. He was being an asshole deliberately. But Saki didn’t deny the part where he’d said she was supposedly the cutest girl in class, which he felt took a lot of nerve.

“So, what? Still want me to break up with Kunimi?”

“I’m the one dating him!”

“But I’m the only one who’s slept with him.”

“.....”

Saki turned slightly red.

“Does that image do it for you?”

“No!”

“Don’t worry, me neither. Not turning gay any time soon. I’m as straight as an arrow fired in the direction of a beautiful girl.”

“What the hell are you even saying?”

“If you don’t want me to be even more obnoxious, get to the point.”

Mai was waiting at home. He wanted to leave as soon as he could.

“.....”

Saki had been the one who approached *him*, but for some reason, she seemed hesitant to broach the subject. Her eyes wandered like she was searching for the right words.

“Azusagawa, you’re friends with her?”

“.....”

“Well?”

“By *her*, do you mean Futaba?”

“The lab coat girl.”

“Futaba.”

“.....”

Saki fell silent again. But this time her eyes soon met his. She always seemed really confident, so this was a new side of her.

“Is she up to anything crazy?”

“...What kind of crazy?”

For a moment, he thought she meant Adolescence Syndrome, but if that was true, she’d have chosen a different phrasing. *Up to* indicated something more

proactive than, say, *mixed up in*. But that didn't make much sense to him.

"What, like, you mean is she making bombs in the science lab?" he asked, trying to get to the bottom of this.

"Are you a total idiot?" Saki scowled at him.

"Then what? Spit it out," he said, getting equally annoyed.

"Well..." But she fell silent again. He'd never seen her at such a loss for words. But just as he was starting to get really frustrated with her, Saki dropped a bomb on him.

"A week ago, I saw her taking a photo of the inside of her skirt."

"....."

It took him a long time to grasp the meaning of that.

"....."

"....."

A silence fell over both of them. The cries from the gym seemed very far away.

"Huh?" he said, after a full five seconds.

"Like I said! Up her own skirt, like..."

Saki shoved her own phone under her skirt as she crossed her legs and struck a pose. Seemed like it would keep her panties just barely hidden.

"Schoolgirls these days are into racy selfies?"

"No!"

"Kamisato, are you just mad horny, or...?"

"Absolutely not!"

"There's a time and a place."

"This isn't about me! It was the Futaba chick! God, you're the worst! Drop dead!"

By the last line, her tone had taken on a dire chill. She *really* meant it this

time. Sakuta knew he'd gone a bit too far, but he didn't let any signs of repentance show.

"...Doesn't seem like her to do stuff like that," he said.

He found Saki's story hard to believe.

"It's true, though," Saki said, nodding emphatically.

"Huh."

"Yep."

"Huhhh."

"....."

"....."

"Is that it?!"

Sakuta felt he was acting sufficiently astounded. This was actually a more shocking piece of news than the fact that there were two Rios. But he hadn't witnessed this firsthand, so it didn't feel real to him. Naturally, he wasn't going to be as worked up about it as Saki was.

And with Adolescence Syndrome already in the picture, Sakuta had been bracing himself for further craziness.

"Azusagawa, you have no idea what this means."

"She took an upskirt selfie, right? What's there to get?"

"It hasn't occurred to you to wonder who she's showing that picture to?"

"Uh...?"

"Clearly not." Saki looked disgusted.

"No clue what that means. Not a whit."

Saki avoided his question while she did something on her phone. She looked like she was losing interest now.

When she looked up from the phone, she strode over to his side, still looking bored. The breeze carried a citrus scent toward him. Probably her deodorant or whatever.

“Like this.”

She shoved her screen in his face.

It was open to somebody’s social media account. The icon cut off most of the face. That made it hard to tell who it belonged to, but Sakuta had a pretty good idea. There were two small moles just under the lip on the right. Rio had two moles in the same place.

The post below that said, **Just a peek**. Dated yesterday. And there was a photo attached. Showing the front of a blouse with three buttons undone, falling open in a way that was definitely tantalizing. The shot was angled like someone peering down from above her, into the valley below.

The shot was cropped very close, but it looked like a school uniform.

“This is her secret account.”

“A what?”

“An extra account you don’t tell your real-life friends about,” Saki said, sounding annoyed.

“Huh.”

It seemed like a really loaded term.

“But in her case, she doesn’t seem to have a main account, so maybe *extra* isn’t the right word.”

“So why do you know about Futaba’s secret account?”

If people you knew in real life found out about it, the account wasn’t exactly secret. And there was no way you’d exchange account details with someone you weren’t friends with and almost certainly had never even spoken to.

“I went to the science lab earlier and found her phone lying on the table,” Saki said.

Did she just admit she snooped around on it?

“That’s what you’re up to while your boyfriend’s playing his heart out?”

“Don’t bring Yuuma into this!” Saki scowled at him.

“What, are you two fighting?”

“.....”

She looked ready to kill him. He must have hit a nerve. He knew they’d planned a beach date a few days ago... Had something gone down there?

“Well, Futaba was careless, and you’re insane.”

But Saki’s deranged behavior had given him a piece of information he’d never have found on his own...

“Kamisato, are you also snooping on Kunimi’s phone?”

“.....”

She said nothing. Just shot him another scowl every bit as terrifying as the last. Maybe that was why they were fighting. Best not to poke the bear any further. He didn’t want the full force of her anger turning on him.

“Can I have a look?” he asked and took her phone from her. He scrolled down a bit, checking previous posts.

He hit the end pretty quick. There were only ten posts total. The first one was her in pajamas. The fluffy type with a hood. But she was wearing shorts underneath, so the focus was definitely on her legs. Soft-looking thighs. Definitely stimulating. The accompanying text offered to take requests.

The other posts were similar. None of them showed her face.

The first post was dated July 25. A week ago.

And there were a bunch of replies.

Nice thighs!

Cute pajamas. Wear something like these!

That cleavage, and you’re still in school?

A perfect I! A natural valley! Push ’em up a bit, and you’ll get a man-made Y!

We got a boob maestro here lol.

And so on... Pretty solid reception. Lots of people asking for more, and word had clearly spread fast.

“Assuming this is really Futaba...”

“It definitely is,” Saki insisted.

“Why is she doing this?”

“To get more followers.”

She had over two thousand.

“And do what with them?”

“Nothing.”

“Huh?”

“Sexy shots are purely for the attention.”

“Ah,” he said, like that made sense, but it really didn’t. He couldn’t begin to imagine why Rio would take spicy selfies or upload them online.

It seemed stupid on the face of it. Nothing more. He was sure Rio knew exactly how ridiculous she was being. But something was driving her to do it anyway. What could it be? He had no idea.

“What makes a girl want to do something like this?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Don’t play dumb. Just tell me.”

“I would never do this! Are you a total idiot?”

“But you’re taking pics like this?”

He showed her an image from her own gallery, which he’d opened without permission.

It was a shot of Saki with her arms around a four-foot-tall stuffed bear. One with a terrifying face that looked ready to eat her up.

“Wh-who said you could look?! How dare you!”

“Always important to ignore your own flaws while criticizing others.”

Saki snatched her phone back.

“Just ask *her*!” she fumed.

Then she turned around and stalked away.

As he watched her go, Sakuta muttered, “She has a weird way of acting concerned.”

And she had an odd sort of moral high ground.

“But what do I do with this?”

With Saki out of the picture, he was left thinking about Rio again.

He could go to the science lab and ask her directly, but there was something else bothering him about this.

Based on the posts on the secret account Saki had shown him, Rio uploaded the first picture a week ago. Yesterday, Rio had said, “For the past three days, there have been two Rio Futabas.” In other words, at the point that first post had been uploaded, there was only one Rio. That meant Rio was uploading sexy selfies before the Adolescence Syndrome entered the picture.

“What the hell do I do now?”

He was aware there were high school girls who took advantage of their own sexuality, using it or...being used for it. People were mad about that on TV all the time.

But until a few minutes ago, that had seemed like the going-ons of some far-off foreign country to him. He hadn’t paid it any attention. He’d never heard rumors about any classmates doing that sort of thing or come across any hints that something like that might be going on.

He’d figured it would never have anything to do with him.

But suddenly it was shoved right in his face, and not someone he barely knew, but a friend...and that fact made his guts feel queasy.

“I’d better talk to somebody...”

He couldn’t think of anyone who knew about that sort of thing.

“...No, I guess I do know one person.”

Not someone he really wanted to see. Definitely not someone he wanted to owe anything to—but who else could he ask?

He sighed, took off his shoes, and went back to the pay phone. He took the pile of coins out of his wallet again and fished out her business card.

4

“Welcome!”

Sakuta had gone back to Fujisawa Station and stepped into the restaurant he worked at. A cute girl’s voice greeted him.

“Huh? Senpai?”

Tomoe came out to meet him. She looked confused. She must have known he didn’t have a shift today.

“Here as a customer.”

“Table for one?”

“Meeting someone. Might be a bit of a wait.”

“Sakurajima?” Tomoe asked. The way she lowered her head there was awfully cute.

“Nope.”

“Kunimi?”

“Not him, no.”

“.....”

Apparently, she couldn’t think of anyone else Sakuta might meet.

“An imaginary friend?” she asked. How rude.

“I *will* grope you,” he said.

Tomoe clapped her hands over her butt.

“Most people would assume I meant boobs.”

“I don’t have enough boobs to grope, and you know it.”

“Whoa, when did we get so intimate?”

“Th-that’s not what I meant!” She puffed out her cheeks.

“You’re awfully cute.”

“Whatever. Over here.”

Tomoe took his praise poorly for some reason. Muttering to herself, she led him to a booth at the back. Table five. The same table Mai had been at yesterday.

When Sakuta sat down, Tomoe asked, “Why are you in uniform?”

“I went to school.”

“Makeup classes?”

“I’m not you.”

“I don’t have those, either!”

“Just had an errand to run.”

“Hmph.”

He was clearly avoiding the question, so she glared at him but didn’t ask further.

“Put a drink bar on my tab. That’s all.”

“Take your time,” Tomoe said, punching the order in. Then she bowed with a smile.

The bell rang. A new customer had entered.

“Welcome!” she called, dashing off.

But she was back at his table a minute later.

“Er, uh...your guest,” Tomoe said, sounding tense. She gave him a look loaded with questions—completely understandable, given who she’d led over.

It was a woman in her late twenties, wearing an elegant white blouse and wide-leg pants that came to midcalf—definitely a grown-up fashion choice. She wore light makeup designed to make her look intelligent and active. Very much like a newscaster...which is exactly what she was. A reporter for a TV station’s news division.

“I thought the two of us were over! Never thought you’d call, asking to meet

again.”

Fumika Nanjou sat down across from him and gave him a loaded smile.

“You sound like we’re a married couple already separated and waiting for divorce papers.”

“Exactly what I was going for.”

How specific.

“Want anything?” he asked as he handed her a menu.

She ignored it and said, “Cheesecake-and-drink-bar combo, please,” flashing a smile at Tomoe.

“R-right, the cheesecake/drink-bar combo,” Tomoe said as she punched it into her order pad. She looked nervous. Halfway through taking the order, she gave Sakuta a glance but didn’t dare ask about their relationship. “Take your time,” she said, like they always did. Then she left them to it.

“She’s cute.”

“Yep.”

“Why do you look so smug?”

“She’s my favorite kohai.”

He got up, went over to the drink counter, and prepped two coffees. One ice, the other hot.

When he got back to the seat, Fumika’s cheesecake had arrived. The tip was missing, so she’d already taken a bite.

“Here,” he said, putting a coffee cup in front of her.

“Thanks.”

Her glossy lipstick touched the cup’s rim. Then she let out a small sigh.

“So you want to talk to me about problems schoolgirls face today?” she asked.

Fumika’s main job these days was as a secondary reporter on the midday news program. She covered all kinds of topics, including entertainment, politics,

and economics. A lot of these involved societal problems and incidents affecting youths. Sakuta had called her on the assumption she'd probably talked to girls who were doing the same things Rio was.

"I've interviewed plenty of girls mixed up in dating-site problems, compensated dating, or similar things," Fumika had said on the phone. Then she said she was free and could come see him in person. "Naturally, that's because I want to tempt you into letting me interview you eventually," she'd cheerily admitted.

"You probably should keep that secret."

"You know it even without me saying so," she'd said, letting his critique roll off her.

Sakuta quite liked this about her. If she weren't so invested in probing him, he'd enjoy her company unreservedly, but as it was, he had to be on guard all the time.

Fumika's main motive for coming was to find out more about the Adolescence Syndrome he'd experienced. He couldn't imagine the world would ever believe anything this crazy was real. He might just end up getting called a liar, but he also might end up with hordes of cameras following him around.

And there was a risk of getting Mai, Tomoe, and Rio involved.

"So what sort of case are you specifically interested in?" Fumika asked before taking another bite of cheesecake.

"Girls uploading close-up shots of their cleavage to social media."

"Of their own accord? Not being tricked into it by men they met on dating sites?"

"I think it's voluntary."

"Hmm."

"What do you make of it?"

"Kids these days develop so early," Fumika said.

Her gaze drifted over his shoulder. He glanced back and saw a group of four

high school girls in uniforms who were showing their phones to one another. Their laughter echoed through the restaurant. They were totally in a world of their own.

“When I was in high school, we had to really work at it to get anything like cleavage.”

“I’m not interested in your development, Nanjou.”

Under that white blouse were immutable signs she’d filled out since.

“Yet you can’t take your eyes off them.”

“I figured it was rude not to look after you brought them up.”

“Men reacting like that has a lot to do with it.”

“.....”

“There’s a demand.”

Apparently, she’d launched into the heart of the matter.

“When I caught you staring at me, I felt a sense of superiority.”

“How frisky.”

“It’s important for women that we get noticed. Of course, we don’t want just anyone looking. We don’t want weirdos after us or harassment at work.”

“But a desire for that sense of superiority leads to uploading selfies?”

“It’s one potential reason why their actions might escalate. They might start out with a picture of thighs or a glimpse of their underwear. Nothing too risqué. But they get likes or comments asking for more, like ‘Nice’ or ‘I wanna see more’ or ‘Show us your swimsuit next time!’ It’s quite common for that to encourage them into getting more extreme.”

“.....”

“You look like you don’t believe me. The girls I interviewed all put it in different words, but fundamentally, they all liked feeling wanted.”

It still didn’t make sense to him.

“Maybe I’m getting ahead of myself. Girls that do this sort of thing tend to be

pretty isolated.”

“Oh...”

“Maybe they don’t have friends at school or had a falling out with the ones they did have... Maybe their family isn’t talking anymore or is putting too much pressure on them, or they’re just not communicating their needs to one another...so they feel like nobody understands them.”

“I see,” he said, but he definitely still didn’t grasp it.

“But because of that, they’re constantly craving acceptance. Anyone with a kind word can fill that hollow emptiness they feel inside.”

“And because they feel hollow, they keep escalating so that people will want them more? That’s the motivation for the selfies?”

“Right.”

“But what do they think about their own actions? Have they convinced themselves it’s a good thing? Do they really want to be doing that?”

That was what was bothering him the most.

“A second-year girl I interviewed said it always made her feel sick. Every time she took a photo of herself in her underwear, she felt embarrassed and ashamed. And was desperately afraid of not getting any responses when she uploaded it. And sometimes the replies would be full of people calling her ugly or creepy, so the anxiety never went away.”

“Then why not stop?”

Or was that opinion just a lazy way of avoiding understanding?

“That anxiety and fear are real issues,” Fumika said. “The more they grow, the more thrilled you are by a positive response. Does that make sense?”

“.....”

He nodded. He knew the intensity a roller coaster of emotions could provide.

“So a single like can wipe out that anxiety and mean a lot to them.”

“But they still hate what they’re doing?”

“Yes. They’re momentarily overjoyed...and then get scared again. And are still craving approval.”

“And to escape that isolation and fear, they do it again.”

“They go into a downward spiral. And once you’re in one, it’s hard to pull out. You don’t want anyone around you to know about it, so you can’t ask for help. It starts out as a whim. But it often follows the trajectory I described, and then a habit forms... At least, that’s how it worked with the girls I interviewed.”

“.....”

Sakuta kind of understood but wasn’t at all sure he really got it.

“Then how do you approach them about it?”

“The worst thing you can do is come in with ‘You’re being stupid.’ They know full well they’re being stupid. And they hate themselves for doing it.”

That, he got.

He remembered when Kaede was being bullied by her classmates. When she stopped going to school, people kept telling her to “hang in there” or accusing her of wimping out.

But Kaede hadn’t stopped going to school by choice. She didn’t *want* to stay cooped up in her house.

She hated not being able to go to school and tried desperately to overcome it. But Sakuta knew now that had just made her suffering all the worse.

What she’d needed was understanding. She’d needed people to praise the efforts she was making.

She wanted to go to school. She just couldn’t. And she needed people who got that.

Sakuta didn’t figure that out until Kaede was covered in cuts. And he might not have ever wrapped his head around that if Shouko hadn’t told him. That he should tell Kaede what she wanted to hear.

“.....”

“Well, I’m sure you know *that*, Sakuta.”

Still, he was glad she'd talked to him about it. Even if he thought he understood, it was good to prepare ahead of time and make sure he took the right course of action.

"No, thanks for the tip."

"Rare for you to say anything not sarcastic to me. Am I one step closer to conquering you?"

"That's a different subject entirely."

"Such a pity."

She didn't seem at all disappointed. Fumika finished her cheesecake.

"This about a friend?"

"No comment."

"And after everything I told you."

"It's a friend," he admitted, not wanting to deal with more flirty teasing.

"Then be extra careful."

"I intend to be."

He wasn't sure there was anything he *could* do.

"It's difficult to fully erase images and words after they're on the Internet. Once you start, it doesn't just go away because you quit."

That was also a problem. People weren't kidding when they said what you post online could permanently affect you.

"Even if she kept her face hidden, there's a chance people will figure out who it is, dox her...and she could get in trouble or even mixed up in crimes. Phones with GPS might surreptitiously include location information in pictures, if she hasn't disabled that in settings."

Useful technology could lead to completely unintended consequences. Information spread at the speed of light in modern times.

"The wind caught my skirt once during a live broadcast, and there are screenshots of that out there forever. Very annoying."

“At least you’re wanted.”

“I was wearing black underwear, and we got these awful phone calls complaining that it was inappropriate for a daytime show. I just want to put it behind me, but I run across them sometimes doing research online, so it’s literally impossible.”

Would black underwear have been somehow more okay at night? He couldn’t comprehend going to the trouble of complaining about something like that.

“Well, enough about me,” Fumika said with a sly grin.

“What?” Sakuta asked. She seemed like she wanted him to be the one to initiate.

“What exactly is your relationship with Sakurajima?”

“We attend the same school,” he said flatly. He took a sip of iced coffee.

“Is that *all*?”

She clearly suspected otherwise, and she had enough clues.

Previously, Sakuta had let her take pictures of the scars on his chest in exchange for information about Mai. Then Mai had offered up the news of her return from hiatus in return for keeping those photos under wraps.

In other words, Mai had protected him. She’d gone far beyond a simple senpai/kohai relationship. It would be weird not to suspect anything.

“She’d never been linked to anyone before, so if she’s caught with a boyfriend, it would be a huge scandal.”

“If that happens, I’ll definitely never let you interview me.”

“Other networks and tabloids will be sniffing around, so be careful. I’d hate for you to turn on me because of them.”

“Fair enough.”

He wasn’t really sure what the impact would be, though. Mai didn’t seem to care about that sort of thing at all. They’d walked into school together all time, and she’d happily stayed over at his place last night. Was she unaware of the risks? Or was she aware of them and didn’t give a damn? He’d have to ask when

he got back.

“So?” Fumika prompted, leaning forward.

“What?”

“How far have you gone?” Her eyes glittered like a gossipy schoolgirl’s.

He shot her a look of utter aggravation.

“Have you kissed?” Fumika asked, unperturbed.

“Nanjou.”

“Well? Go on. Have you?”

“You sound like a nosy grandma.”

“It’s hardly worth keeping secret,” she said as she flopped back against her seat.

“Do you not have a boyfriend?” he asked, trying to turn the tables.

“Oh, you’re gonna regret asking that,” Fumika said, and she spent the next hour griping about her significant other.

She’d been dating the same guy since college. They were the same age. He worked in sales at a telecommunications company, and they’d been living together for three years. Fumika was just waiting for a proposal, but it increasingly seemed like he didn’t plan on doing that. And the night before, he’d said something about being nowhere near as successful as her and wanting to achieve something first.

“Achieve *what*?” she asked, taking it all out on Sakuta.

“Well, if it doesn’t work out, can’t you just dump him? Find yourself a baseball player.”

But apparently she still loved him.

Sakuta was completely unable to care, but this was the price he paid for her intel.

After they finished, Sakuta walked back to his apartment alone. It was already seven. The sun was out of sight, but the sky was not yet entirely dark.

As he passed a nearby park, he heard a cicada singing right next to him. All on its own. That cry belonged to a large brown cicada. During the day, there were all kinds of cicadas, and the sound could get pretty obnoxious, but on its own, the sound was rather mournful.

“...Isolation, huh?”

That word kept echoing through his mind. It had really leaped out at him when Fumika said it. Like a knife in his heart.

If she was right, Rio was tormented by feelings like that.

“She’s definitely not the type who fits in with the other girls.”

In communities that emphasized conformity and empathy, Rio’s logical side would work against her. He was sure Rio knew that better than anyone. That’s why she was always left out by her classmates.

Only Sakuta and Yuuma ever talked to her. Was that not enough? Or did her feelings of isolation stem from outside of school?

“Something at home?”

Standing here looking for the cicada wouldn’t help answer that, so he headed home.

He’d never once been over to Rio’s house. He had no idea what it even looked like, wasn’t even sure if it was a house or an apartment. She’d never mentioned what her parents did for a living.

The only thing he knew was that the closest station was Hon-Kugenuma, and that was one station down the Odakyu Enoshima Line from Fujisawa Station.

It seemed sort of late to be realizing how little he knew about her. She wasn’t the type to share much on her own, and even if he did ask, she would only offer the bare minimum answer, so there was little opportunity to learn personal information during ordinary conversation.

“Well, if I don’t know, I’ll just have to ask.”

Watching from a distance wasn't going to fix anything. Even if it forced him to pry, he was gonna have to get in close.

With that thought on his mind, he looked up at the sky and let out a huge yawn.

"I'm baaack," he called out as he stepped through the door.

But there was no answer. Kaede usually came running out to greet him. He gave the living room a long look, but there was no sign of her.

"She asleep?"

He took off his shoes and went inside. He stopped to wash his hands and gargle, then stepped into the living room.

Kaede and two cats were taking a late nap in front of the TV.

"Welcome back."

The voice came from the kitchen, so he turned toward it. Rio was standing by a pot on the stove, stirring the contents with a ladle to keep anything from burning on the bottom.

"What are you doing, Futaba?"

"Making curry."

"Dressed like that?"

Rio was wearing her white lab coat.

"I don't want it splashing on me."

"Not an appetizing visual..."

She totally looked like a science mage. A poker-faced, theory-spouting, logical witch. It was hard to believe she *wasn't* concocting some dangerous drugs in that pot.

"I'm following the recipe exactly, so it should be fine."

She had a cookbook open next to the pot. One Sakuta had bought when he and Kaede first started living together and he needed to learn how to cook. He hadn't used it much lately and wasn't even sure where he'd put it last.

“Uh, so Mai...?”

Kaede was sound asleep on the living room floor, but there was no sign of Mai.

“She’s reading a script in your room. She said to send you in once you got back.”

“Okay, I’ll just go change.”

He couldn’t feel comfortable wearing his school uniform in the house. It just felt gross.

“I always undress the moment I get home.”

“I did *not* need to know that,” Rio said. She never took her eyes off the curry.

Sakuta went to his door and knocked. “Mai, can I come in?” he called.

“.....”

No answer.

He’d followed the proper procedure, so if Mai happened to be changing, she had only herself to blame.

Hoping against hope something like that would happen, Sakuta opened the door.

“.....”

He found Mai immediately. She was lying on her back on his bed. Totally relaxed posture, eyes scanning the script in her hand.

She was wearing a hoodie and loungewear that came to just below the knee. A rare glimpse of her calves without the usual black tights over them.

“.....”

The look on her face was very intense. Focused like a laser, to the point where it affected the whole vibe of the room, making the very air tense. There was no way he could possibly interrupt.

Doing his best to not make a sound, he stepped inside, carefully closing the door behind him. Then he waited on his knees in the corner. The pressure Mai

was radiating inspired that level of formality.

“.....”

He watched her chest rhythmically rise and fall. Proof she was living. She was blinking regularly, so it definitely didn't seem like she'd fallen asleep with her eyes open.

Not wanting to bother her, he searched for a way to pass the time. He looked around the room, and it was decidedly tidy. She really had cleaned the place. Even that three-month-old manga magazine he'd left in the corner was now neatly stacked on his desk.

Bored, he reached out and picked it up. Like Mai had said on the phone, there was an idol group on the cover. Seven girls, maybe fifteen or sixteen years old. They had bright smiles and their outfits were a bit edgy, more rock styled. But that look was mingled with idol fashion, and the result was like a really well-done Halloween costume. A nice blend of stylish and cute.

He turned the page and found a few more shots of those girls inside. And an article introducing each of them. The group was called Sweet Bullet. *Are they the next big thing?* it said in sparkly letters.

Then his eyes lit on one profile. It gave her height, city of birth, and a list of her favorite things. And that list included *Mai Sakurajima*.

Her name was Nodoka Toyohama. Sixteen years old. Everyone else had black hair, so her blond hair really stood out. Usually, people listed stuff like “Strawberries” when asked what their favorite things were... The other six sure did.

Feeling silly for doing a deep read on the profile of some idol singers he'd never heard of, he closed the magazine and put it back on his desk.

He looked at Mai again, and her lips were moving. Maybe she was mouthing her lines.

“...Mai?” he said softly. Growing tired of waiting.

“.....”

No change.

“Maybe I can get away with doing something dirty.”

“I can hear you.”

At last, her eyes left the manuscript and looked at him.

“Am I interrupting?”

“If I didn’t want to be interrupted, I wouldn’t be reading a script here. Welcome home.”

“Good to be back.”

She closed the script and sat up, legs dangling over the edge of the bed.

Sakuta sat down next to her.

“On the floor,” she said, pointing like it was a doghouse.

“I’m not gonna jump you,” he grumbled but moved to the floor. “Your manager came?” he asked, figuring that was what she wanted to discuss.

“She did. And she left.”

“You talked?”

“We did. That’s why she was here.”

Obviously.

Mai seemed a little out of sorts, so he could imagine how that had gone.

“What’d she say?”

“She didn’t say we had to break up, but she did want us to spend some time apart.”

Pretty much what he’d predicted.

“Can I ask the reason for that?”

“I only recently started working again, so a scandal this soon could really hurt me. And I just signed a commercial contract, so I need to be mindful of the impact on the sponsors. If the media gets wind of my boyfriend, the fallout could damage not just my reputation but the products I’m associated with.”

“So if you’re not single, sports-drink sales will crash? Such power!”

He felt like those sales probably wouldn't be affected that much, really.

"I understand fans getting pissed off if a hunk from a boy band dates a girl and definitely why a married actor cheating on his wife is a big deal, but if dating a kohai from school—and a thoroughly ordinary one, at that—can do my image any harm at all, the world is doomed."

"I completely agree."

"Ryouko seems to have mistaken me for a forever-pure idol."

Mai's eyes turned briefly to the magazine on Sakuta's desk.

"Ryouko is your new manager?"

"Yep. Ryouko Hanawa. She hates her last name, apparently. Said her nickname was Holstein as a kid."

Hanawa was written with the kanji for *flower* and *ring*, but it sounded like *nose ring*, and a little free association got you to Holstein cattle.

That name was definitely thought up by a particularly stupid boy. Sakuta kinda liked it.

"And just in case you're wondering, Ryouko has a willowy build."

"I didn't say anything out loud, right?"

With a name like Holstein, he had immediately assumed she was sporting quite a rack, but he knew better than to admit that.

"She said the irony just made it worse."

"Mind if I ask a rude question?"

"....." Mai fell silent, shooting him a look of contempt.

"I was only going to ask about her age."

He certainly hadn't been considering asking for her bust size.

"She's twenty-five. Been working there three years."

"So you agreed to this twenty-five-year-old Hanawa's proposal?"

"It isn't something I can unilaterally decide on my own, so I tabled the decision."

“You mean because it affects both of us?”

“Yes. This is our problem.”

He liked the sound of that. Their problem.

But the solution to the problem was never really in question. No matter how you looked at it, they only had one choice.

And Mai knew it, which was why she was in a bad mood.

“I guess we gotta, huh? For a while, at least.”

That was their only option.

So Sakuta thought saying so would be the end of it.

“What do you mean, we gotta?”

All expression had left her face and voice.

Her earlier irritation had been directed at her agency and manager. But now she was coming for Sakuta’s throat.

It was a quiet fury, but she was clearly very angry.

“Huh? Why are you mad? Are you mad at me?” he asked with exaggerated fear. He felt like if he took this seriously, this might turn into a real fight.

Mai relaxed a little, making a show of glaring at him.

“Don’t try to wriggle out of this,” she said.

This was scary, too, but not that scary. It was a playful sort of anger.

“It’s a strategic retreat.”

“You’ve got a lot of nerve.”

“I don’t pick fights I can’t win.”

“Liar. You fight when you have to.”

“That just makes me sound cool.”

“Saying that yourself totally ruins the effect.”

She threw the script at him. It bounced off his head.

“Ow. If this leads to me developing a new fetish, you’re to blame.”

“.....”

“Sorry, bad joke.”

“Are you okay with this? With not seeing me?”

“I mean, if you think about it, we already aren’t seeing each other much.”

“You’re still saying that after last night?”

Her eyes bore into him. This was alarming, so he went back to being serious.

“Honestly, I hate the very idea.”

“.....”

“But...your manager also has a point. You’ve just started back up. It makes sense to be on your best behavior to get back in everyone’s good graces.”

“How boringly sensible.”

She grumbled, but he was pretty sure she’d made up her mind, too. Mai had known things would turn out like this from the start. But she’d made the choice to talk things through and treat it like a problem that affected them both.

With the conflict resolved, the door slowly swung open. Kaede peeked around the doorframe. She’d woken up from her late nap.

“You’re home?” she said.

“Yep.”

“You two done with your talk?”

“We are.”

“Then Rio says it’s currytime.”

“As opposed to dinnertime?”

“Oh, that smells good.”

Mai was right. The air was filled with the aroma of spices.

Rio had made legit slow-cooked curry.

“Futaba, you’ll make a great wife one day.”

“Curry tastes the same no matter who makes it.”

Rio did not seem at all embarrassed, like this was totally normal.

“Well, the way you made it seemed more like a mad experiment.”

She’d used the full range of measuring spoons, while Sakuta tended to eyeball everything. He could definitely picture Rio weighing every ingredient down to the milligram just like she did in the science lab.

He was fairly certain that was exactly what she’d done, even if he hadn’t seen it with his own eyes. Between that and the lab coat apron, he’d expected a far more medicinal curry.

When the four of them finished eating, Sakuta walked Mai outside. They took the elevator down together and stepped into the street.

The sky above them was dark now. It was half past eight, after all. But there were no clouds, so the deep blue was quite striking.

Mai lived in the apartment building across the street, so the trip there took less than a minute.

They stopped just outside the doors to her building.

“Good night, Mai.”

“Mm. Good night, Sakuta.”

“Bye.” He raised one hand in a wave and started to turn back.

“...Oh, wait,” Mai said, her voice soft.

“Want a good-bye hug?”

“.....”

“Wait, really?”

“No... Well, not entirely wrong, but...”

Mai looked around them.

“Mai?”

“It’s just, we won’t be able to see each other for a while.”

“Yeah.”

He couldn't say he was happy about that, but they'd talked it out and agreed it had to be done.

“This might be the last time we see each other until school starts again.”

“Don't worry. I'll hunt down a secluded corner of the school where no one will see us together.”

“But you're okay with this?”

“Huh?”

“Just saying good-bye like this?”

She looked up at Sakuta. It was tempting. Her face was turned slightly downward, like she was embarrassed, but her eyes never left him.

“Um...”

He was the first to break eye contact. He glanced toward the road to the station.

“There's no one here,” Mai said, looking around.

He shivered.

“And no suspicious cars stopped nearby.”

They didn't have to worry about foot traffic, and there were no paparazzi in sight.

He couldn't very well back down now. There was nowhere to run.

Sakuta put his hands on Mai's shoulders.

“.....”

“.....”

Their eyes locked together for a few seconds, then Sakuta leaned in, and Mai closed her eyes. Was that a reflex? She lowered her chin, as if she'd tensed up. Sakuta bent his knees a little, like he was peering into her face, and then their lips touched.

“Mm...”

A soft sound escaped her nose. He felt the warmth of her breath on his cheek. It tickled. He was so focused on his lips he'd forgotten to breathe himself. When he started to need air, he pulled away.

Mai looked up at him like nothing had happened. But she couldn't hide the blush on her cheeks.

"....."

"....."

"S-say something."

"That was delicious."

"Idiot."

A bit of false bravado there.

"Can I have a second helping?"

"You really are an idiot."

This time she actually meant it. She shook her head at him. The awkwardness faded away. He missed it immediately.

"Next time," she said.

"Aw. You've lit a fire in me, and I can't be restrained anymore!"

"This isn't mating season, and you aren't a monkey, so you can and you will."

"That's exactly what I am. I'm a monkey in heat, and it's all your fault, Mai."

"I don't need a monkey for a boyfriend."

"I was only doing what you begged me to do."

"I didn't beg!"

She glared at him.

"Are you suuure?"

"I am."

"But it was so cute, Mai."

"That won't save you. You get far too carried away."

“.....”

“Dead-fish eyes won’t save you, either.”

“I was going for abandoned-puppy eyes.”

“You have no acting talent. Possibly negative acting talent.”



A brutal review.

“Well, good night.”

“.....” He tried a wordless protest.

“Sakuta, you have to say good night, too.” Like she was scolding a child’s manners.

“Good night,” he said robotically.

“I’ll call, at least.”

“Wow. Can’t wait.”

She gave him a long, exasperated sigh.

“Fine, this is the one time I’m letting you get away with this,” she said very quickly.

Then she took a step closer to him. She stretched up and planted a gentle kiss on his lips. A very short one, barely a brush.

“Now we don’t get to kiss next time.”

“What?! There’s a hard limit?!”

“Absolutely.”

Mai grinned, having toyed with him enough for now. She turned around like a dancer and went back to the doors of her building. Sakuta watched until she was out of sight.

“Crap, now I’m really in heat. What do I do with all this passion?!”

He couldn’t stay turned on until the sun rose. Circumstances didn’t allow it. He still had things to do tonight.

He had to go back home and have a serious conversation with Rio.

“Maybe I could leave Futaba till tomorrow...”

Probably not, though. Sighing, he turned to go.

When Sakuta got back from walking Mai home, Kaede was in the bath. Rio was sitting at the dining room table, reading a hardcover book. Maybe a novel?

Sakuta had planned to clean the kitchen, but it was already taken care of. The pot and plates were on the drying rack. The leftover curry was hibernating in Tupperware in the fridge.

“Thanks, Futaba.”

“Mm,” she grunted, not looking up from the book. “You sure took your time with it,” she added.

That seemed like a loaded statement, but perhaps unintentionally. It seemed more like she was just stating the facts as she saw them.

“What are you reading?”

“Your sister said it was good, so...”

She lifted the cover so he could see. *The Naked Prince and the Grumpy Witch*, by Kanna Yuigahama. Kaede’s favorite writer.

Sakuta had read several books by her at Kaede’s urging but never really got into them. They tended to have ambiguous endings that left a bad taste in his mouth. Kaede said that wasn’t the point, but...

“Another depressing story?”

“Mm? Not really... So far it’s just about an ordinary girl excited because she finally has a boyfriend.”

That certainly sounded uplifting.

“The boyfriend is super popular, so she’s always wondering if a girl like her is really good enough for him, and every time a better-looking girl gets close to him, she starts thinking they’re obviously the superior choice and gets really anxious. But she can’t just admit that, so she takes those emotions out on her boyfriend.”

That was very specific. And this girl sounded like a real pain in the ass.

“Is that...fun?” he asked, genuinely unsure.

“I think so. I can empathize with her messed-up personality.”

“I guess that’s one way to enjoy things...”

“Girls are all about conformity. And empathy,” Rio said analytically. She was a girl herself, but it sounded like she tried to have an objective perspective on it. Which made him wonder if she was *actually* enjoying the novel.

“Done with my bath and piping hot!” Kaede said. Sakuta grabbed a sports drink from the fridge and handed it to her. “Now I’m ice-cold!”

“Futaba, the bath’s all yours.”

“.....”

Rio finally took her eyes off the book, but only to give him a look of contempt.

“Just for the record, I have no intention of doing anything with the broth you leave behind after your bath,” he insisted.

“Azusagawa.”

“You get me, right?”

“The fact that you even used the term *broth* is punishable by death.”

“...Then I’d better take my bath first, huh?”

“Yes. This is a good part anyway.”

Rio’s eyes were flicking up and down, following the lines.

“They about to kiss?”

“She’s discipling her boyfriend with an expression like she just found some vomit on the sidewalk.”

That was certainly beyond his wildest expectations.

“That does sound interesting. I’ll have to read it when you’re done.”

And with that, he headed into the bathroom.

He undressed and promptly scooped some hot water onto his head. Then he got a sponge lathered up with body soap. He started by cleaning his right arm, like always, then tossed the sponge to his right hand and polished the rest of his body. When he was done, he rinsed the soap off and shampooed his scalp. Finally, he washed his face. He used the showerhead to make sure he was

thoroughly cleaned before lowering himself into the bath. After a total of ten seconds, he got out.

“Futaba, the bath’s all yours.”

“I’ve seen crows bathe longer than you.”

“It’s summer. I’m hot enough already.”

He definitely stayed in longer during winter.

Rio stuck a bookmark between the pages, thanked him, and went into the changing room. The door shut firmly behind her. But the only locks in this apartment were for the toilet and the front door.

He could hear cloth swishing through the door. But sitting with his ears perked up was creepy, so he moved over to the fan and turned it on. The breeze felt great on his bath-warmed skin.

“I come from space,” he said, using the fan to imitate an alien. He was immediately ashamed of himself.

After cooling himself for a good five minutes, he stood up and went to the bathroom.

He opened the door to the changing room. A dull sound echoed from the bath. The washbowl scraping on the floor.

He could see a girl’s silhouette through the clouded glass door. Her back to him. Busy washing herself.

“Futaba, can I ask you something?”

“Can I ask *you* something first?”

“Mm?”

“Why do you insist on having these talks while I’m bathing?”

“‘Cause it’s thrilling knowing there’s a naked girl on the other side of the door.”

“.....”

“And some topics are easier if we aren’t looking each other in the eye.”

“Like what?”

She sounded guarded but started lathering herself up again.

Sakuta sat down on the floor of the changing room, avoiding the area by the door. This next conversation was gonna last awhile.

“What’s your home like?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“An apartment?” he asked, ignoring her reticence. “A house?”

“A house.”

“Big one?”

“Bigger than some.”

“Are you secretly rich?”

“Maybe a bit,” she admitted.

But the way she spoke, it was almost like they weren’t talking about her. Like it was her parents who were rich, not her.

“What do your parents do?”

“Dad’s a doctor.”

“Wow.”

“Hardly unusual.”

“Your family own a hospital?”

“Not a private practice. He works at the university hospital.”

“So he’s constantly embroiled in power struggles at work?”

“It’s like you know him.”

“Wow.”

He could hear her rinsing off. Then Rio’s silhouette moved to the bath.

“What about your mom?”

“She runs a boutique for brand-name imports.”

“A real-life small business owner?”

“They exist. What’s your point, Azusagawa?” She sounded calm. He figured that meant she’d already worked out that he’d uncovered at least one secret. “What did the fake tell you?”

“My source is a bit more complicated.”

No way she could have guessed Saki would be involved.

“But I know what you’ve been doing.”

“Oh.”

That was it. No emotion to her voice. Like she was talking to herself.

“.....”

“.....”

“I made that account before summer vacation started,” Rio said reluctantly. “But I didn’t know what to post in it.”

This sounded like the start of a grade-schooler’s essay.

“Just post whatever,” Sakuta said. “Tweet about how you’re in love with a handsome guy, but he’s got a girlfriend.”

“Would that be fun for strangers to read?”

“Aren’t girls all about empathy?”

“People would just think I’m a weirdo. ‘Shut up, frumpy.’”

“Harsh!”

He’s certainly never found Rio off-putting. She could be a little uptight, sure, but that was part of her appeal.

“I certainly don’t have the nerves of steel it takes to ask a famous actress out in front of the entire school.”

“What you’re doing takes more guts than anything I’ve ever done.”

“.....”

“I’ve known you for over a year, but you’ve never shown me any cleavage like

that.”

“Why would I show *you* anything?”

“If you don’t care who you show yourself to, why not show me?”

“You really are an idiot.”

“That’s what Mai said.”

And for pretty much the exact same reason.

“I guess that’s what I don’t get. You usually have your guard up about that kind of stuff, right?”

“...You can be irritatingly perceptive sometimes, Azusagawa.”

“You’re just not that complicated.”

She wore her skirt longer than most students, and she always kept all the buttons on her blouse done up. At this seaside school, tons of girls rolled into class without their uniform vests, but she kept a white lab coat on all the time. Which had long sleeves, and a long hem that hid her legs still further.

“You know that about me, yet you still harass me all the time.”

“I’m pretty careful not to cross the line into something that would *really* bother you.”

“You’re a dick.”

“So what? You got so fed up with me, you decided to make some new friends online?”

“I dunno... I don’t think that’s it.”

“Is it something else?”

“It’s much more basic than that. I just wanted attention from somebody,” she said, mocking herself. There was no sense of drama. She wasn’t unleashing anything pent-up inside. All that came out was her usual flat voice.

But that was what worried Sakuta. It would be a lot easier to resolve this if there was a clear trigger that had made Rio decide to start uploading selfies. But there wasn’t. The only cause he could see was a simple accumulation of

gloomy thoughts. The daily grind had brought her here, not anything dramatic.

One drop of depression after another, filling her cup until it overflowed. That was what it seemed like.

Those emotions just slowly sank their teeth into her heart. Without Sakuta ever realizing anything was wrong.

“Jumping straight to horny posts is basically cheating.”

“That was all I could think to do.”

“If anything, I’m surprised you’re so confident in your sex appeal.”

“Confident? Ha. I’ve got nothing but baggage there.”

That made sense. She wouldn’t be so guarded about it otherwise.

“In junior high...I developed before the other girls. And the boys in our class were a pack of chimps, and I knew how they saw me.”

“‘Futaba’s boobs are craaazy!’ or whatever?”

“Someone literally said that.”

Sakuta had been a chimp-like junior high boy himself once, so he knew only too well what they were like. He wasn’t even sure he’d evolved *that* much since then. But at that age, everyone was *very* conscious of girls’ bodies. A bra strap seen through a uniform blouse was a big deal. The early bloomers in class would naturally get a lot of attention. And in Rio’s case, she’d been the one who was singled out.

“After school one day, I was on cleaning duty. I came back from taking out the trash and heard the boys talking about me. And I’ve hated my body ever since. It felt like I was something filthy...”

It was a sensitive age, so major shocks at that time of life could stay with you for years. Even if it only happened once, if it stuck in your mind, it would inevitably change the way you acted permanently. But no one would’ve realized that at the time...

“Sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“On behalf of all chimp boys.”

She laughed. He thought she sounded a bit relieved.

“But I just couldn’t handle having boys stare at me after that,” she explained.

He could understand that easily. But not how that led to what she was doing now.

“So why those photos?”

It seemed like a huge reversal. Rio hated guys ogling her. But she was uploading raunchy photos—even if she did hide her face in them.

“If I uploaded, people would react.”

“You like having dirty old men panting over you?”

“If you can choose who pays attention to you, that means you’re attractive enough to command a selection. We can’t all be wanted in the way we’d like.”

“I don’t wanna hear this *real* shit.”

“It didn’t matter who it was. Getting any response made me feel better.”

“That’s basically admitting it wasn’t what you really wanted.”

“That’s why, I guess. I couldn’t get rid of the loathing that came with being seen. I felt a huge amount of stress from the conflict between my goal and the means I was using to achieve it. And I think that contradiction split my consciousness. If I think of it that way, lots of things make sense.”

A calm, rational analysis.

“So you’ve split into ‘Futaba who wants attention’ and ‘Futaba who can’t accept what it takes to get it’?”

He knew that sounded like lunacy. But that seemed to be the essence of what Rio was saying.

“I doubt the split is that simple or clear. But you’re probably headed in the right direction, at least.”

“Hmm...”

He looked up at the ceiling. The fluorescent light was flickering. He should

probably replace it with an LED, but they were so expensive... His mind wandered briefly, but those thoughts soon faded.

“Seems like the other Futaba’s still uploading.”

“I know. I was monitoring it at the Internet café. I considered deleting the account outright, but she’d already changed the password.”

“So what now?”

“Nothing,” she said, sounding like she’d given up.

“Nothing?”

“She’s me, so I know. She won’t just stop. If it was that easy, we never would’ve started.”

“I didn’t say anything about how easy it would be to make her stop.”

“.....”

“I’m asking what you *want* to do, Futaba.”

“I’d like her to stop.”

“Got it. Leave it to me.”

He didn’t have a clue how to make that happen, and he didn’t think she’d listen to a lecture from him. Like Rio said, if it was as simple as just wanting to quit what she was doing, she never would have started at all.

This wasn’t a logical situation. If logic would resolve it, Rio would have settled it without his help.

But she couldn’t, so here they were.

He got to his feet.

“What are you planning, Azusagawa?”

“I’m gonna go to school tomorrow.”

“And?”

“I’ll have a leisurely chat with her.”

“And then?”

“Go to school again the next day.”

“And I’m guessing you’ll talk to her again?”

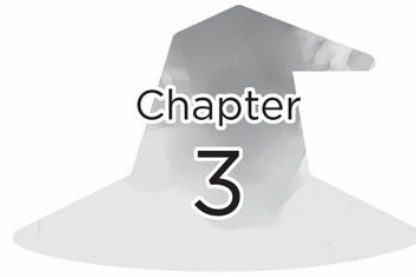
“Probably.”

“What a nightmare.”

“I mean, if I asked the other you to hit the beach with me, you’d say no, right?”

“One hundred and twenty percent no.” A very convincing statement. Rio herself said it, so it must be true. “It was just like you said. Some things really are easier to discuss if we can’t see each other.”

Sakuta pretended not to hear this and left the changing room. He was already racking his brain as his problems multiplied...



friendship travels at 25 mph

1

The next day was August 4, a Sunday. A sunny Sunday.

Sakuta went out on the veranda to hang up the laundry and saw a big white cloud drifting across the sky from west to east. There was a gentle breeze, but the sun was beating down. It was gonna be a scorcher.

The clock showed ten AM. The intercom always rang then, but not today. Instead, the phone rang.

“Coming,” he said.

He recognized the number on the monochrome display. An eleven-digit number starting in 090, calling here? That had to be Shouko’s cell phone.

“Azusagawa speaking.”

“Good morning. This is Makinohara.”

“Morning.”

“Um...sorry,” she said, without context.

“Mm?”

“I’m not going to make it this morning.”

Had something come up? She sounded downcast, which was concerning. They hadn’t talked long, but she definitely wasn’t herself.

“Okay, I’ll make sure to feed Hayate for you.”

“Okay, thank you. And, um...”

“Mm.”

“It won’t just be today. It’ll be a week...maybe longer.”

“You going abroad?”

Not that she sounded like she was taking a trip. She seemed unclear on the time frame, like the plans weren’t set in stone.

“No, not a vacation. But I am going to be out of the house for a while.”

What would you leave home for if not a vacation?

“.....”

He considered this. Only one answer came to mind. Sakuta had gone through it once himself. But he decided if that was true, he shouldn't ask Shouko about it.

She was clearly choosing her words carefully. She must not want him to know. And that was a good reason not to press her any further.

“Got it. Lemme know when you can come again. I'll look after Hayate until then.”

“Okay, thanks.”

He heard a woman's voice call Shouko's name. Her mom, maybe? “Coming!” Shouko called. Then she said, “I'll be in touch.”

She hung up, still sounding glum. Sakuta put the receiver down.

“Kaede!”

“What?” Kaede said, looking up from her homework.

“Makinohara won't be coming for a while, so Hayate's all yours.”

“Leave it to me!” Kaede said, beaming with pride.

Sakuta ate lunch a bit early, changed into his uniform, and got ready to head out to school.

“You really are going,” Rio said in the hall. Nasuno was rubbing against her feet. Looked like they were friends already.

“You wanna join me?”

“I think it's better I don't.”

“Why?”

“You know the doppelgänger legend. If two people with the same face meet, one of them dies.”

“Yeah.”

“And according to quantum teleportation, it shouldn't technically be possible

to verify both of us at the same time, so...”

“According to that hypothesis, if I did meet you both at once, what would happen?”

“To correct the contradiction, once of us would vanish. Or the paradox would collapse, and both of us would cease to exist.”

That wasn’t funny.

“Rumor has it an author died that way—one so famous a prize was named after them. Stories about doppelgängers may have come from people encountering the same phenomenon I am.”

The author in question *had* written a story about encountering a doppelgänger. And back in grade school, when it was all the rage to share urban legends, these stories were considered particularly believable.

“That’s why it’s probably better I don’t go.”

“Mkay, look after the place for me.”

He moved to the door and put his shoes on.

“I’ll have dinner waiting.”

“It’s like we’re married.”

He’d meant that as a joke, but Rio looked deeply disgusted.

“That’s the second time you’ve said that today.”

The first had been that morning. Rio had helped with the laundry, saying it was the least she could do for letting her stay. She’d ironed the wrinkles out with surprising ease. He could tell she handled her own laundry all the time. And when she was hanging up Sakuta’s underwear, he’d cracked the same joke. She’d ended up throwing the underwear at his face.

“All that’s left is to greet me wearing an apron.”

“That’s only newlyweds.”

“Right.”

“And you should reserve those fetishes for Sakurajima.”

“Good idea.”

Sakuta left, picturing Mai in an apron.

The summer air was muggy and damp. The sun was beating down. Watching the road mirage retreat ahead of him, Sakuta walked his usual route to school.

Ten sweat-drenched minutes to Fujisawa Station. Up the stairs, across the connective passage, straight to the Enoden line.

As Sakuta passed through the gate onto the platform, a green-and-cream-colored train pulled in. The front of the car looked like a friendly face and gave off a retro vibe. Like it was dutifully carrying people from Fujisawa to Kamakura despite the sweltering heat.

He stepped into the air-conditioned car, and as he cooled off in an empty seat, he saw a familiar face board the train.

Minegahara’s summer uniform—a navy skirt, a white blouse, and a beige vest. A red tie, properly bound. The exact look the school recommended for its female students. Very few people actually wore it unaltered.

“.....”

When her eyes met Sakuta’s, Rio sat down next to him.

The warning bell rang. A group of college girls came rushing on at the last minute, and the doors closed behind them. The train slowly pulled out of the station.

“Figure anything out?” Rio asked, staring out the window.

“Your nudes are amaaaazing.”

“.....”

“I mean, I knew. Even with your clothes *on*.”

If he looked at her boobs now, she’d definitely yell at him, so he focused on the view, just like she was. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see she had her hair up still. No glasses. The other Rio had the glasses, so this one probably didn’t even have the option.

“And you’ve come to tell me to stop being stupid?”

“Hell no. That sounds like a hassle.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I can’t get a date with Mai, and I’m bored, so I figured I’d come hang with you.”

“.....”

She considered this.

“I see,” she said. “You’ve decided to give yourself an even bigger hassle.”

In lieu of an answer, he turned and looked her in the eye.

“What?”

“You got any other pictures? Non-close-ups?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Can I see?”

“.....”

That was definitely disgust on her face.

“Why care if I see anything now?” he asked, pressing further.

Rio silently handed him her phone.

He opened the photo folder, and the viewer screen filled with images.

“That’s a lot...”

There were over three hundred of them. At least ten times what he’d expected.

But they weren’t all provocative shots designed to arouse or stimulate the viewer. Some of them were just the palm of her hand or the tips of her toes. She’d even taken a shot of the inside of her backpack.

He flipped back down the timeline and found a picture of her in a different uniform. A navy-blue blazer and a skirt down to her knees. Her face looked younger. Her hair was shorter. But it was definitely Rio.

“Is this...?” he asked, showing it to her.

“Junior high.”

She had already been taking selfies by then. This ran deep.

“Plenty of faces and full-body shots.”

The further he went back, the more of those he found. It was only in the newer stuff that she started keeping her face hidden. In return, she started showing more skin, or glimpses of her underwear—much more sexually charged.

“I didn’t originally plan on showing anyone, much less uploading them online.”

“Just your own private album?”

“You make it sound worse than it is.”

“You have only yourself to blame.”

“Fair.”

Rio’s smile was filled with self-loathing, and Sakuta didn’t like it. He didn’t want to see her look like that.

“When I first started taking selfies, I just wanted to look at myself objectively and go, ‘You’re being an idiot.’”

“I don’t get it.”

“It felt satisfying to show myself how dumb I was.”

“.....”

He really didn’t get it.

“Calling this ‘self-analysis’ may just be silly, but I consider it a form of self-harm.”

That was pretty much the opposite of silly. But it *was* absurd to be saying that herself. Especially since, despite knowing better, she’d not only kept doing it, she’d escalated.

“Maybe this won’t make sense to you, but...I hate myself.”

“The other Futaba said as much.”

Starting with the changes to her body. She'd said seeing how the boys reacted to that made her feel filthy. She'd come to hate her curves.

"That's why I punish myself. Because I hate myself."

"You reject the parts of yourself you hate and feel momentarily better?"

"You're smarter than you look."

"But those parts you rejected are still you."

Ultimately, her actions resolved nothing. A little time would pass; she'd snap out of it and realize the obvious. She'd look back at what she'd done and despise her own weakness. Then she'd hate herself even more and do the same thing to punish herself. And as this cycle repeated, the actions she took became harsher and more extreme.

Rio was wrestling with a contradiction so great it had split her in two.

Sakuta couldn't say he truly understood it. But he could empathize with at least one aspect of it.

When Kaede was in her first year of junior high and her classmates started bullying her, Sakuta had watched her suffer, powerless to help. There was nothing he could do. He felt helpless and worthless, and with no outlet for those feelings, they ate away at him from the inside.

Feeling utterly pathetic, Sakuta had put himself through the wringer. And at the end of that downward spiral, he'd found three gaping cuts on his chest. The only explanation he'd ever found for them was that they were a punishment he'd inflicted on himself. Proof of his sin, his failure to save his sister.

"Azusagawa," Rio said.

He looked up. "Mm?"

"Whose side are you on?"

"I am on Rio Futaba's side," he said immediately.

"That's a weaselly answer."

"Such contempt!"

"My other self and I will never see eye to eye."

“Don’t be stupid.”

“That was blunt.”

“I don’t pull punches with friends.”

He was a little embarrassed by that but thought it was worth saying. He knew it would get to her. But she just laughed it off.

“Then I won’t hold back, either—Azusagawa, you’ve gotta give up on one of us.”

“What a terrifying thought. I might just piss myself.”

“If you’re being flippant about it, that means you already know I’m right.”

The train stopped. They’d reached Shichirigahama Station.

“The world doesn’t need two Rio Futabas,” she said, her voice cold and flat.

She stood up and got off the train.

The loudspeaker announced the departure.

“.....”

While he searched for an answer, the doors closed, and the train pulled out with Sakuta still on board.

“She really *can* be terrifying. I might actually piss myself...”

The woman next to him must have heard that, because she edged away.

“I’m kidding,” he said.

But of course, she didn’t move back.

Sakuta considered getting off at Inamuragasaki Station (the next stop) but ended up riding the train all the way to the end of the line at Kamakura Station.

Then, for no good reason, he left the station, went into a nearby shop, and bought a pack of five dove-shaped sablés. These cookies were a Kamakura staple souvenir. Having been born and raised in Kanagawa Prefecture, they were as familiar to Sakuta as *shumai*.

With his purchase in hand, he went back to the station, boarded the Enoden, and rode it back the way he’d come.

This time he actually got off at Shichirigahama, the stop for his school.

His detour had left him arriving about forty minutes later than originally planned.

“I brought presents.”

He put the yellow box of dove cookies down on the lab table Rio was using.

“Where did you even go?”

“Kamakura, ho!”

“Whatever you say.”

Losing interest, Rio reached for the package. She’d just brewed a batch of coffee, so she was in the mood for sweets. Apparently, she was the type who start with the tail.

Sakuta picked one up himself. He started with the head.

“You decide which of us to back?”

“Look, Futaba.”

“What?”

“You’re gonna have to decide that yourself.”

“.....”

“This is your problem, and you’ve gotta solve it.”

“You *do* have a point.”

Sakuta pulled a stool out from under the desk and sat down. To fill the silence, he grabbed the remote control and turned on the TV.

The screen dangling from the ceiling by the blackboard came on. Showing a midday current-events talk show.

A familiar face was interviewing people at a sand-art competition on a beach somewhere. Fumika Nanjou, holding a microphone, eyes on the camera. On location today.

“Look at this incredible piece!” she said, sounding quite excited. She waved at the sand sculpture behind her. Someone had made a model of the Sagrada

Família, the famous church in Barcelona. And with all eighteen towers complete. Better than the real thing. Fumika was right—it was incredible.

It was a class above everything else in the competition.

“These two are the creators of that masterpiece.”

Fumika brought in a woman and a man, both in their midtwenties. The man was tall and slim, with glasses—smart and handsome. He smiled, not at all afraid of the camera. The woman was small and cute, with an impressive figure. She had a T-shirt on over a red bikini, clearly visible through the shirt; her boobs seemed like they barely fit in it, and the T-shirt was really short, offering a clear view of her taut, healthy waistline.

She was maybe Rio’s height. Sakuta glanced to his side for comparison, and their eyes met.

“My waist isn’t that narrow,” Rio said, reading his mind.

But that also meant she was in the running for the other categories. Maybe Rio nude was even more amazing than he’d imagined.

“Are you a couple?” Fumika was asking.

“You’re even more beautiful in person, Ms. Nanjou,” the guy said, ignoring the question. When Fumika blinked at him, he added, “She’s my wife.”

The girl held up the glitter band on her left ring finger. “Sparkle!” she said.

“You’re so young! Newlyweds?” Fumika asked.

“Nope! We married at eighteen!” the man said, staring into the distance.

Marrying that young must have a story behind it. Maybe he was reflecting on the hardships. Sakuta would be eighteen next year, but *marriage* might as well be some fantasy-world jargon.

“E-eighteen?!” Fumika stammered, caught completely off guard. “So I understand your wife did most of the work. What challenges did you face?”

“I’m in another competition at Kugenuma Beach on the twenty-third! Come shake my hand!” the girl yelled the moment the mic was on her. What was she even doing?

Then she stared roaring and advancing toward the camera. The man—her husband—grabbed her in a full nelson and dragged her out of the frame.

“.....” Fumika stared after them for a moment, then recovered and said, “Back to the studio!” with a big smile.

Everyone in the studio had an awkward expression, and they soon cut to a commercial.

Another familiar face appeared on screen. Mai. In a shampoo commercial. Beautiful hair spreading outward, then gathering back together. “Everyday moisture keeps it supple,” the narrator said. Mai smiled into the mirror, like she was giggling. The combination of beautiful and cute was devastating. It got him every time. He savored the moment.

When another commercial began, Sakuta picked up a fan from the desk and went over to the window. The AC was turned down a bit, so the room was a little stuffy. He began fanning himself.

He could see five people running around the track in the blazing sun. Yuuma was way out ahead of the others. Must be the basketball team.

“Hey, Futaba.”

“What?”

“What would it take for you to be one again?” he asked, not turning around.

The world doesn't need two Rio Futabas.

Rio's words had been looping through his mind. The suggestive photos were an issue, too, but he couldn't let this Adolescence Syndrome keep on going.

“We can't.”

“If a split in consciousness caused this, can't it merge again?”

“...Well, maybe,” Rio said, finally conceding some ground.

“How do we make that happen?”

“At the moment, we're moving further apart. The two of us are doing totally different things. The more our memories and experiences diverge, the less likely we are to merge again.”

“Gimme a more optimistic read before I get an ulcer.”

“I guess we just both have to feel the same way.”

“Like how you wuv Kunimi so much?”

“.....”

That earned him a frosty silence. If he turned around, there would likely be an equally frosty glare. So he just didn't turn around.

“I believe the two of us do agree on that point.”

“So be one again!”

“If that hasn't brought us together by this point, then we need something stronger than that.”

“Something you're more fixated on than Kunimi?”

Sakuta couldn't think of anything.

“Don't ask me,” Rio said, holding both hands in the air.

She'd dumped a problem with no apparent solution in his lap.

He grimaced and focused on the dove cookie.

Tossing the last bite of tail in his mouth, he chewed it over. Yuuma's lap was taking him past the school building.

Yuuma's eyes met Sakuta's in the lab window. Yuuma grinned and came running his way, then collapsed against the school wall. Sakuta opened the window.

“Argh, I'm dying!” Yuuma said, gasping for air.

Sweat was dripping onto the concrete below.

He saw Sakuta's fan. “I need one of those,” he said, fingers opening and closing, like he was demanding tribute.

“No way.”

“Why not?!”

“What's in it for me?”

“I need wind!”

Sakuta ignored him, turning around.

“Futaba,” he said, waving to her.

She looked up from her test tube. “What?”

She sounded annoyed, but she joined him at the window. Sakuta handed her the fan.

“Cool Kunimi down.”

“He asked you.”

“If I was gonna be fanned by someone, obviously I’d prefer it be a girl.”

“.....”

She looked disgruntled, but this was half embarrassment.

“Futaba! I need wind!” Yuuma wailed.

Rio thought for a moment, then silently started waving the fan.

“Ahhh...that feels amazing!”

The other four players were still running. Or staggering.

“Aren’t you usually in the gym? Why is it just the five of you running?”

The team was larger than that.

“Penalty for losing yesterday.”

“Wait, *your* team lost?”

“They put me on a team of first-years!”

“Not like you to blame your teammates. You must be a fake!”

“I dunno what kind of person you think I am...”

“I know you’re obnoxiously popular.”

“Cruel!” Yuuma said, laughing out loud.

“It really is a mystery why you two are friends,” Rio muttered.

Yuuma just grinned at her. Sakuta followed suit. Rio was looking for an

answer, so neither of them gave her one. It was tough to put into words anyway. They just got along. That was all. Sakuta had known right away they could always speak their minds, and Yuuma would always get if he was joking or serious.

He felt the same way about Rio. They'd first talked in depth in the first term of their first year. *After* rumors started spreading claiming Sakuta had got in a big fight in junior high and sent some classmates to the hospital.

Sakuta had been looking for a place to eat lunch in peace. And he'd found the science lab—but it was already occupied.

"Everyone in school's scared of you, yet you keep on showing up," she'd said.

"Agh, everyone's avoiding me! As if I'd say something so over-the-top."

"I don't think it's that much of an exaggeration, actually. Are you right in the head? Oh, you aren't; that's why you keep coming to school."

"You're pretty cool, Futaba."

"Huh? How?"

"You're talking to me, right?"

From the get-go, neither of them had held back. He remembered it well. Things were still like that now, a year later.

"Last dash!" Yuuma called, addressing his teammates. The four first-years managed a final burst of speed, trying to be the first to reach him.

Then they fell to their knees, gasping for air, shoulders heaving.

"Ugh, no fair, Kunimi!" one of them said, seeing Rio fanning him.

"You've got a girlfriend, and now this girl's fanning you? Why does everyone fall for you?"

Sakuta totally agreed with this kid. He nodded emphatically.

"She's lovely! You gotta introduce us!"

"Is she a second-year?"

"Huh? You don't know Futaba?"

Rio was pretty well-known, really. The second-year who always wore a lab coat. Even the first-years probably knew her by now.

“Huh?” They all blinked, exchanging glances.

“I didn’t know she was this cute,” one of them whispered, but Sakuta heard him clearly.

Rio didn’t have her lab coat, her hair was up, and she wasn’t wearing glasses. That changed her look enough that they hadn’t recognized her. When Sakuta first saw her like this, he’d done the same thing.

“You all have no eye for women. Can’t introduce her to you now, can I? Get on back to the gym.”

Yuuma shooed them away.

They shuffled off, glancing back at Rio every now and then.

“Second-years are so grown-up!”

“Definitely my type.”

“Sexy smart! Smart and sexy!”

“I’d like to have her teach *me* a thing or two!”

They were really getting worked up.

“I dunno that you’ve got much of an eye yourself, Kunimi,” Sakuta grumbled. But he was thinking about something else entirely.

Rio’s words were still echoing through his mind.

The world doesn’t need two Rio Futabas.

She wasn’t wrong about that. The world just wasn’t set up to handle two of the same person. They couldn’t both attend school next term, nor could they both live in the same home. How would she even register her current address with the government?

And at the moment, this Rio was the only one actively participating in society. Only a few people even knew that the Rio at his apartment existed.

Things couldn’t go on like this. But none of his classes had taught Sakuta a

way to turn two people into one.

Rio had said they needed something they both felt strongly about, but he couldn't think of anything stronger than Yuuma. He was at an impasse.

"I dunno what to do," he muttered.

"Mm?" Yuuma said.

"Never mind."

For now, he had no choice but to skirt the issue.

2

"So how long are you planning to keep this up, Azusagawa?" Rio asked, out of nowhere.

They were on their way home from school, sitting on a bench at Shichirigahama Station, waiting for a Fujisawa-bound train.

It was now August 12.

Sakuta had been showing up in the science lab every day for a week.

"Until you stop doing what you're doing."

Futaba was still uploading racy pictures.

He'd checked at an Internet café on the way home from work yesterday, and there'd been a picture of a test tube in her cleavage. Apparently answering a request to put something in there. Frankly, Sakuta thought this was pushing things so far it was just dumb; he didn't think it was sexy at all.

"Or at least until you agree to show these sexy selfies to no one but me."

"You're getting further from that goal every day."

"Shame."

He leaned forward, looking toward Kamakura. Still no train. It was after six, but the sky was still bright—maybe just a trace of red in the west.

"What experiments do you have planned for tomorrow?"

She'd been doing a lot of rather dull ones. Measuring gravitational acceleration, rolling a little dynamics cart around. She worked diligently at them, but they weren't fun to watch.

"Maybe I should make a rocket to entertain you?"

"Would you actually?"

"Out of a plastic bottle."

"Oh."

"I'd make you go fetch it for me."

"That's what you want from me? No competitions to see whose rocket goes higher?"

"You wouldn't stand a chance."

She pulled out her phone. Seemed like she'd got a text.

But the moment she read it, she flinched. She quickly took her eyes off the screen but then checked again. She looked very pale.

Rio hid her phone's screen, placing it facedown on her thigh and putting both hands on top of it so the display wasn't visible at all.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

Rio wouldn't even look at him. Her attention was entirely on the other people on the platform. Several Minegahara students. A few other groups of students. Her phone vibrated again.

"Futaba?"

"...I'm fine."

She didn't look fine. There'd been a long pause before that answer, and her voice was hoarse. The hands on her phone were shaking, and not because of the phone's vibrations.

"Somebody reply?"

"....."

Rio nodded slightly.

“Can I see?”

He glanced down at her phone.

“No.”

Sakuta reached out anyway. He slipped his fingers under hers, touching the phone’s cover.

“.....”

Rio lowered her head a little but didn’t stop him pulling the phone out.

Did that count as permission?

Sakuta looked down at the screen.

It was open to the social networking site’s direct messages.

That’s a Minegahara uniform, right?

An alarming opening.

I went there myself, that’s why I know.

This message had appeared a moment later.

I’m in the area, wanna meet?

A third message. As he watched, more flooded in.

I can sponsor you. 15 sound good?

I’ll tell the school if you don’t meet me.

And you don’t want that, right?

C’mon, let’s meet up. You’re down, right?

They just kept coming.

Rio was looking at the screen from next to him, and her hand had fastened itself to his sleeve. He could feel her trembling getting stronger.

“People like this really exist,” he muttered, writing a response. Even as he typed, more messages poured in.

We gotta meet!

Waiting for your answer!

Are you even reading these?

Don't blame me for what happens.

This dude didn't even give her time to answer. What an asshole. Sakuta finished the message.

"Azusagawa?"

He pressed send.

"What did you just...?"

"This."

He showed her the screen, with the message he'd sent.

Calling the police.

The phone stopped vibrating. No more messages came.

"That should handle it."

"...Delete it."

"Mm?"

"Delete that account."

"Got it."

He had Rio watch to make sure he was doing it right and deleted the account for her.

"That good?"

"Mm."

A Fujisawa-bound train finally arrived, so they got on board.

The car was fairly crowded. Inside was a group of middle-aged women on their way back from Kamakura, clutching bags of souvenirs. There were also young couples and groups of students heading home after a day on the beach.

Sakuta led Rio to an empty seat in the middle of the car, and they sat down.

Rio never once let go of his shirtsleeve. This earned them some warm looks. They must have seemed like a brand-new couple.

“Sorry,” Rio said softly. “Serves me right, huh?”

Her body, voice, and heart were all still in the grip of fear. Totally terrified.

“I... I dunno why. I’m just so scared.”

She couldn’t stop shaking. Their shoulders were pressed together, so Sakuta couldn’t help but notice.

“Texts and messages are like being stabbed,” Sakuta said, staring straight ahead, keeping his tone conversational.

“.....?”

“When Kaede was being bullied, her counselor told me we get eighty percent of our information from people’s eyes.”

“...True.”

“So getting a letter or an email that says ‘Drop dead!’ is way worse than being told the same thing face-to-face.”

And texts arrive without warning. If you’re talking to someone, the flow of conversation gives you time to brace yourself. But electronic messages can catch you completely off guard. Before you can put up any sort of defense, the malice within is already gouging a hole in your heart.

And that’s exactly where Rio was now.

When they reached Fujisawa Station, Sakuta went through the Odakyu Enoshima Line gates with Rio. He’d normally have turned to head home here, but he couldn’t very well do that today.

The platform was a long one—it looked like the end of the line. The rails might only go out one way, but the trains did actually head in two directions—it was a reversing station, with some trains going to Shinjuku, and others to Katase-Enoshima.

They followed the other passengers.

“Um, sorry,” Rio said, as if suddenly concerned she was being a burden or

causing trouble for him.

But it seemed she still couldn't bring herself to let go of his shirtsleeve.

"I'll have to tell Kunimi how cute you were later."

"....."

She gave him a wordless glare, but the residual fear meant she still looked ready to cry.

They boarded a Katase-Enoshima-bound train that was waiting at the platform.

He couldn't exactly leave her alone right now, so Sakuta made up his mind to take her all the way home.

The warning buzzer sounded, and the white cars moved down the track out of Fujisawa Station. Rio lived by Hon-Kugenuma, which was only one stop away. The train ride didn't take long.

It was a five-minute walk from there.

"Here," Rio whispered, stopping in front of a house in a quiet neighborhood. This area was mostly houses; the few apartment buildings were on the small side, five floors tops. Nothing crowding out the sky.

Rio put her hand on the impressive double gate. It had a decorative arch across the top. Definitely looked like a rich-people house.

Inside, there was a ten-yard stone path leading to a cube-shaped, chic house. The garage to the side definitely looked like the doors opened automatically. And like it could hold three vehicles.

"Wow," Sakuta said, impressed.

"No warmth anywhere, right?" Rio said, unemotional.

"Doesn't seem like anyone lives here."

More like one of those model homes from the Shonan area he'd seen on TV.

"Normal people would try to be considerate and go, 'Oh, no, it's really nice!'"

"Don't expect that from me."

“Fair enough.”

They reached the door. Rio pulled out a key and opened it. There were lights on inside, but no signs of life. The entrance lights probably turned on automatically.

It was past seven. The sky was starting to darken.

“Make sure you lock the door.”

“Azusagawa.”

Rio turned around, clutching the door. She looked anxious.

“Mm?”

He knew what she was going to ask before she said it. The message from that strange creep had rattled her badly, and she was still frightened.

“Could...you stay?” she asked, barely audible. But she got it all out.

“Your parents are...?”

“My father’s in Germany for a conference. My mother’s in Europe on business, too.”

“That happens in real life?”

“It happens in my house.”

“I should point out that I’m a boy.”

“Well, if anything happens, I’ll tell Sakurajima all the gory details. With embellishments.”

“Stick to the facts, please.”

“I trust you.”

“I’d prefer to be considered a potential threat.”

“Stop being dumb and come in.”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

Inside the doorway, the stillness was even more pronounced. Even the swishing fabric of their uniforms sounded loud. Maybe the vaulted ceilings in

the entrance enhanced it.

He followed Rio into a large living room. It was maybe 350 square feet. All monochromatic black-and-white interior design. There was a comfortable looking couch, and a sixty-inch TV. From the window, he could see a well-kempt garden.

The kitchen had a counter that faced the living room, and the glass-doored cabinets behind that were filled with spices and utensils—again, like a model home. The halls were all lit by fancy indirect lighting.

Simple, but elegant. It boasted an unmistakable sense of luxury. The kind of place anyone would want to live in someday.

But Sakuta felt there was something fundamentally missing. He'd noticed it before he even stepped inside.

This house had no smell. No character.

It was like a beautiful container, but nothing about it seemed like Rio, even though she lived here. He couldn't even feel her body heat.

It gave him a weird feeling as if he'd stepped into some unknown dimension. Just standing here made him nervous.

"They're away often?"

"Not that often."

"Oh."

"Only like half of every year."

"That qualifies as often."

Way too often. When Rio had said *not that often*, he'd imagined, like, two or three times a year. But it made a weird kind of sense. That explained why the house was like this. If her parents came home every night, it would be different.

"My father rents a room near the hospital and usually sleeps there, and my mother's often overseas for business. Totally normal."

"How is any of that normal?"

But this also explained why the other Rio seemed so familiar with cooking and

doing laundry. If she was doing all the housework herself six months out of every year, she *had* to get good.

“This is normal for us. Neither of my parents were ever meant to be parents,” Rio said, as if stating facts that everybody knew. At the very least, she no longer seemed to have any strong feelings on the matter. She’d given up on it long ago, and it was just the way things were...is how Sakuta read it anyway.

“My father only married to increase his chances of a promotion.”

“Huh?”

“There are places where you can’t move up if you’re single.”

“And your mom was cool with that?”

“My mother got married so she could call herself Dr. Futaba’s wife. Their interests aligned. And they each do whatever they please, so what’s to complain about? Seems like you have some very old-fashioned ideas, Azusagawa.”

“I’m a caveman. Don’t even own a phone.”

“Huh?”

“This cute kohai called me that.”

“Oh, the Laplace’s demon? She’s got a way with words.”

Rio smiled faintly. This wasn’t normally something that would make her smile. He wasn’t sure if it was conscious or not, but it felt like she was forcing a smile to try to make herself feel better.

She went around turning on lights and pressed the button to start the bath.

“Once it’s full, you go first,” she said.

“Okay.”

With Rio in this condition, it seemed inadvisable to suggest he go second. It wasn’t like he would stay in the bath long.

At least, that was the plan. But once undressed and in the bath, Rio said, “I’ll wash these, so stay in there until they’re dry.”

“How long will that be?”

“Thirty minutes.”

“You want me to die?!”

She heartlessly declined to answer.

When Sakuta staggered out, half-dead, Rio took his place. She stayed in there a full hour.

Sakuta was under strict orders to remain on guard outside the bathroom. She really didn't want to be alone right now.

Sakuta sat down outside, leaning against the bathroom wall. It was a lot like the two long talks he'd had with the other Rio.

“Azusagawa.”

“I'm here.”

“Mm...”

“.....”

“Azusagawa?”

“Still here.”

“Mm...”

“A.....”

“I said, I'm here!”

This repeated several more times.

“Um, Azusagawa...”

“Seriously, should I just get in with you?”

She was quiet a moment, then said, “...If you keep your eyes closed the whole time.”

Rio would normally *never* say anything like that. She was definitely in a state.

“No way! That's some advanced fetish stuff I am entirely unprepared for.”

“Then sing a song.”

“That’s even worse!”

When Rio finally finished her long bath, they ate a light meal. Using that amazing kitchen to prepare instant ramen. Sakuta found this amusing, but Rio didn’t get what was funny about it. She lived here, so that made sense.

During the three-minute wait, he made a quick call home and let Kaede know he wouldn’t be back that evening.

Then they sat down on the couch in front of the TV, slurping instant ramen. In lieu of music, she put in a Blu-ray of some overseas TV show, and they sat like that, watching.

But even watching TV got exhausting after five straight hours of nothing else.

It was half past one now, and he started nodding off.

“Bedtime?” Rio suggested.

She’d been in her pajamas since she got out of the bath, and now she headed for the stairs. He’d seen those fluffy pajamas in one of the photos. And she was wearing shorts underneath, so her legs were dazzling.

Figuring he couldn’t very well follow her to her room, Sakuta stopped at the base of the stairs. Rio noticed and turned around halfway up.

“We should probably crash on the couch,” she said.

“Shame. I wanted to worship your room.”

“Now I really don’t wanna let you see it. You’d probably tell Kunimi all about it, too.”

“Well, of course.”

“Sigh...”

Rio came back to the living room and sprawled out on the couch. Sakuta moved the coffee table a bit and lay down on the floor next to her.

The carpet was really thick, and it was comfortable enough. More than enough. Way better than his own living room.

“Good night.”

“Mm. Good night.”

Sakuta had been yawning all through the last episode they’d watched, but once he lay down, sleep didn’t come.

He’d intended to stay up until Rio fell asleep, so it worked in his favor, but...

Rio had been lounging on the couch for over an hour. Based on her irregular breathing and frequent changes to her position, she wasn’t sleeping, either.

Rio let out a long sigh. Like she was trying to process something. A very conscious sigh.

Sakuta stared up at the ceiling, lit only by the light through the crack in the curtains.

After a long silence...

“Azusagawa, are you awake?” she asked.

“Sound asleep.”

“Doesn’t seem like it.”

“Almost asleep.”

He deliberately yawned. It was best if Rio got some rest. Anxiety would only lead to more negative thoughts. When you’re feeling down, sleep’s the best cure. Think about it later.

“I was scared, I think.”

“.....”

“Right now, I have you and Kunimi. But I was scared I’d be alone again eventually.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t feel like that before high school. Being alone was normal for me, at school or at home. It only became scary after I got to know you and Kunimi.”

“Kunimi has a lot to answer for.”

“Half the responsibility is yours. I never looked forward to going to school before. But once I met you two...I did. A little.”

“Just a little?”

“Do you *enjoy* school?”

“Not at all. At most...a little.”

“Exactly.”

But even that “little” had started to make her anxious. When people find a source of joy, they want it to last forever. And the thought of losing it naturally makes them afraid.

“When Kunimi got a girlfriend, I got really scared.....”

“You should have just been like, ‘Why *her*?’”

“I did, but...”

“You did? Nice, Futaba.”

“But a glamorous girl like that belongs by Kunimi’s side. I don’t.”

“Kunimi’s a villain! He’s made you so sad.”

“You don’t get to criticize him.”

“Huh?”

He’d thought he was safe, but apparently not.

“I thought I’d never see you again once you picked up a girlfriend that beautiful.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he snorted. “I mean, she does get me hot and bothered, but...”

Rio chuckled. “Never heard anyone actually say that. What decade is that even from?”

“But I’m planning on staying friends with you for life, Futaba.”

“You don’t have any friends, either.”

“Exactly. So don’t be fading out on me. I’d cry.”

Rio didn’t answer. It felt like she wasn’t sure where they stood.

“Also, you really don’t get it, Futaba.”

“Get what?”

“Even though you’re madly in love with Kunimi, you don’t understand him.”

“That’s not...”

“You don’t,” Sakuta interrupted. “I’m gonna use your phone for a sec.”

He’d been holding on to it for her this whole time, powered down. He turned it back on, and the screen lit his face.

“To do what?”

“Show you how amazing Kunimi is. You’ll fall in love all over again.”

Yuuma’s number was on the screen. Sakuta pressed the call button.

“Azusagawa, you can’t!” Rio sat up. “He’ll think I’m insane, calling at this hour!”

Panic and confusion—like any girl in love. Every particle of her being was desperate to avoid doing anything that would make Kunimi turn on her.

“Too late.”

He held the phone to his ear, listening to it ring. It was two thirty in the morning, so it took a while to answer.

But Sakuta never doubted Kunimi would pick up.

He did so on the sixth ring.

“Mm? Futaba?” Yuuma asked blearily. He’d definitely been asleep.

“It’s me.”

“Sakuta?”

He sounded clearly disappointed. Definitely a little slow on the uptake, but he’d recognized Sakuta from his voice alone.

“Futaba’s in a bind. Come to Hon-Kugenuma Station.”

“Okay, got it.” Yuuma’s tone changed immediately. It sounded like he’d jumped to his feet. “On my way,” he said and ended the call.

The volume had been turned up high enough that Rio heard that last part,

too.

Sakuta powered off the phone off again and stood. Rio was sitting on the couch, looking shocked.

“Kunimi’s on his way.”

“You’re crazy, Azusagawa.”

“Crazy like the dude who didn’t even think twice about coming over at this time of night.”

Yuuma lived north of Fujisawa Station. It was two, maybe two and a half miles from here. And the trains weren’t running this late, so he’d have to find another way to get here.

It wouldn’t be quick.

“Better wash your face, Futaba.”

She hadn’t been crying or anything, but her eyes were a bit puffy.

“And get dressed.”

The fluffy pajamas were pretty cute but not really suited for going outside.

“Maybe dress up?”

“I’m not changing into anything weird.”

“Mm. I’ll wait out front.”

Sakuta left Rio in the living room and headed for the door.

He waited out front for fifteen minutes, and just as his butt was getting to know the stones by the door, Rio emerged.

“Sorry that took so long,” she said.

Like he’d suggested, she’d washed her face and looked much more put together. She had her hair up, too, tied back with a scrunchie.

She was wearing a baggy T-shirt. One that hid her figure. It had long sleeves and a hem that reached all the way down to her thighs. Below that, she had on denim capris that left very little leg uncovered.

“.....”

She'd kept him waiting long enough, so he gave the outfit a good look over.

"Wh-what?" she asked, bracing herself.

"Not enough skin. Try again," he said, pointing at the door.

"We can't keep Kunimi waiting," she said and headed for the station. Her sandals had a bit of a heel to them, making her a couple of inches taller. That seemed like the best she could manage right now.

"Mm, well, it's pretty good for you."

"I don't know who made you the fashion police."

"Personally, I'd have gone with short shorts under a shirt like that, but oh well."

Rio glanced down at herself.

"That would make it look like I wasn't wearing anything."

"That's the point. You gotta sell the dream."

".....Um, Azusagawa."

Rio suddenly sounded serious.

"Mm?"

"Is it really not good?"

She looked worried.

"I can't speak for Kunimi."

"I'm asking your opinion. The male perspective."

She sounded annoyed, but he took that as an expression of her stress and anxiety.

"It's very *you*, so it's fine."

"Argh."

"You asked!"

Nothing he could say would alleviate her worries. The current source of that was Yuuma himself.

It was three in the morning, so the streets were deserted. They didn't see anyone else until they were almost at the station.

Someone was sitting on a bicycle near the ticket machines.

Wiping a fountain of sweat from his brow with his T-shirt.

When he saw Sakuta and Rio coming, he said, "You're late!" and came pedaling over to them.

It was Yuuma, bathed in streetlights. Even Sakuta hadn't expected him to be here already. He must have run straight out of the house and biked over as fast as he could.

"You're way too fast."

"You told me to come flying!"

"Are you made of muscle?"

"Basically."

Yuuma turned to Rio.

"Futaba, you okay?"

"Uh?"

"Sakuta do anything weird?"

"I would never."

"You're the most likely cause."

"Then I wouldn't be the one reporting it."

"Obviously, your conscience got the better of you. Wait, do you even have one?"

Yuuma was Yuuma, even after a three AM bike ride.

"Why...?" Rio whispered. "Why...?" she said again.

And then it all happened fast.

Tears welled up in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks, and they kept flowing, dripping onto the asphalt at her feet.

“Why...? Why...?” she kept saying.

“Don’t make her cry, Kunimi.”

“This is my fault?”

Yuuma reeled in the face of Sakuta’s scorn. Having no clue what was going on did not help.

“It’s absolutely your fault.”

“Crap.”

Yuuma scratched his head, at a loss.

“It isn’t your fault,” Rio said, voice choked with emotion. She wiped her tears away with both hands. Like a crying child.

“It’s not your fault, Kunimi...,” she said again. Maybe unsure she’d actually been intelligible. “Don’t mess with his head, Azusagawa.”

She glared at him over her damp hands.

But all he could think was that she looked exactly like a sulking toddler.

“You even cry cute, Futaba,” Sakuta said.

She cringed. “I don’t... I haven’t cried in a long time,” she said.

Maybe she just didn’t know any other way to let it out. So even at her age, she still cried like she had when she was little.

“But... But...” Her emotions got the better of her again. She choked up. “I... I...”

She sniffed. Her face was a mess.

“I wasn’t alone. I’m really not alone.”

Rio was still sobbing, but she seemed happier now. So Sakuta said nothing else. Yuuma might have no clue what this was about, but he silently watched over her, too.

For a while, Rio kept saying she wasn’t alone, trying to stop crying, failing, and unleashing another wave of tears.

“Sakuta,” Yuuma said.

“Mm?”

“Can you run and get us some drinks?”

“Squeezing free drinks out of me now doesn’t make a whit of sense.”

“We’ve both lost a ton of fluids and gotta replenish,” Yuuma said smugly.

“That’s a flimsy rationale, but, well, it’s a special occasion.”

“I’ll take any soda. Futaba?”

“Iced coffee,” she managed.

She was looking at the brightly lit convenience store down the street. Vending machines clearly weren’t gonna cut it here.

“Don’t blame me if you can’t sleep later,” Sakuta said and headed toward the store.

Once inside, Sakuta grabbed a blue-labeled sports drink off the shelf. A two-liter, out of sheer spite. He took that to the cash register and ordered an iced coffee to go with it. While the college-aged clerk was making that, Sakuta picked up a set of handheld fireworks from the side of the counter and got it all rung up.

“Thank youuu. Come agaaain,” the clerk droned as Sakuta left.

Yuuma and Rio had moved closer. Rio’s face was red.

“What, was Kunimi getting saucy?”

“No. He just noticed my outfit...,” Rio told him softly.

It must have been a compliment, if she was blushing this hard. *Well done, Yuuma... He never misses a beat.*

Sakuta handed her the iced coffee. There was already a straw in it. He handed Yuuma the two-liter. The same sports drink Mai did commercials for.

“I see Sakurajima still has you whipped,” Rio said, a smile on her tearstained face. She’d stopped crying, at last.

“You pick the weirdest ways to stan her,” Yuuma said.

He didn’t complain about it not being a soda. Or it being a two-liter. He

actually chugged half the thing in one go. The complaint about thirst must have been real. The remainder went into the basket on his bike.

“So what now?” Yuuma asked. He was resting on his bike seat. It was well past three in the morning.

“These,” Sakuta said, tossing the convenience store bag in the basket. The fireworks he’d bought were sticking out.

“There a place nearby where we can light them?” Yuuma asked.

There was nothing but houses in every direction, so...good question.

“The beach?”

“That’s a long walk from here,” Rio said. This was her home turf.

“I could ride the bike with you on the back, while Kunimi runs alongside. We’d be there in ten minutes.”

“It’s my bike!”

“What, are you gonna make Futaba run?”

“I had someone else in mind,” Yuuma chuckled. But he handed the bike to Sakuta. He did a few warm-ups and stretched his Achilles tendons, obviously getting ready for a run. “But if I made you run, it would hardly be any faster than walking.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. With all the breaks I’d have to take, walking would be *way* faster.”

“Not something to be proud of.”

Yuuma started to laugh out loud but remembered how late it was and stopped himself.

“Futaba,” Sakuta said, waving to the back of the bike.

“I’ll go on ahead,” Yuuma said and ran off. Now Rio couldn’t refuse. Or demur.

“You’re not supposed to ride two to a bike,” she said, but she sat sidesaddle on the rear rack. She took a firm grip on the back of the seat.

“You can put your arms around me if you like.”

“You’re so gross, Sakuta.”

“I was kidd— Erp.”

He let out a little yelp, because Rio had surprised him by actually putting her arms around him. She locked her hands in front, leaning up against his back. Lots of warmth and softness going on.

“I’ll have to tell Sakurajima how turned on you got,” Rio said. It sounded like she was mostly trying to cover how awkward this felt.

“I’ll look forward to her scolding, then.”

“That’s our rascal.”

Grinning at that, Sakuta started pedaling. They swayed pretty bad until he got up to speed.

“K-keep it straight!” Rio squeaked.

“You’re pretty heavy!”

“Drop dead.”

Once they were balanced, they soon caught up to Yuuma.

“You two having fun?” Yuuma asked, grinning at him.

“Not at all!” Rio said, still annoyed by the dig at her weight. Like any ordinary girl would be.

Fifteen minutes later, they’d reached Kugenuma Beach, one station south from Hon-Kugenuma. One corner of Shonan, facing Sagami Bay. There was a park along the coast, with a path through it to the sand. There were beach volleyball courts and a skateboard rink nearby. Sakuta would definitely *never* use either of those.

Enoshima lay to the east. It was quite far from here, so Benten Bridge looked more like a tightrope.

“Sakuta.”

“What?”

“Isn’t it a bit windy for this?”

Sakuta, Rio, and Yuuma were standing in that order, their backs to the water, trying to form a wall against the wind but not having much luck getting the included candle lit.

“There’s a typhoon coming in tomorrow night.”

That explained why the wind was so damp.

“Get in closer, Kunimi. Use that prodigious height to shield us.”

“You too, Sakuta.”

They huddled up against Rio.

“H-hey...,” she protested, but they ignored her. “Kinda cramped here,” she said, hunching over.

“Oh, it lit!” Yuuma said. “Futaba, hurry,” he urged.

The flame was already sputtering. Rio stuck the tip of her firework in it, and it caught immediately. Green sparks gushed out. They changed to yellow, then pink.

Sakuta and Yuuma got theirs lit, too. The area around them was suddenly much brighter.

The smell of burning fireworks definitely said *summer*.

Given how much they’d struggled to get the candle lit, now that they were going, they were really worked up. They started lighting one firework after another, like it was a race to see who could light the most.

A few minutes later, the wind died down. The three of them exchanged glances, then reached for the sparklers. They lit them on the count of three and watched them go.

“You’re not gonna ask, Kunimi?” Rio inquired, eyes on the sparks.

“Mm?”

“About me.”

“When Sakuta called, I did wonder,” he said, like it was no big deal.

Rio’s eyes turned toward him.

“But when I saw you crying like that, I figured that was enough.”

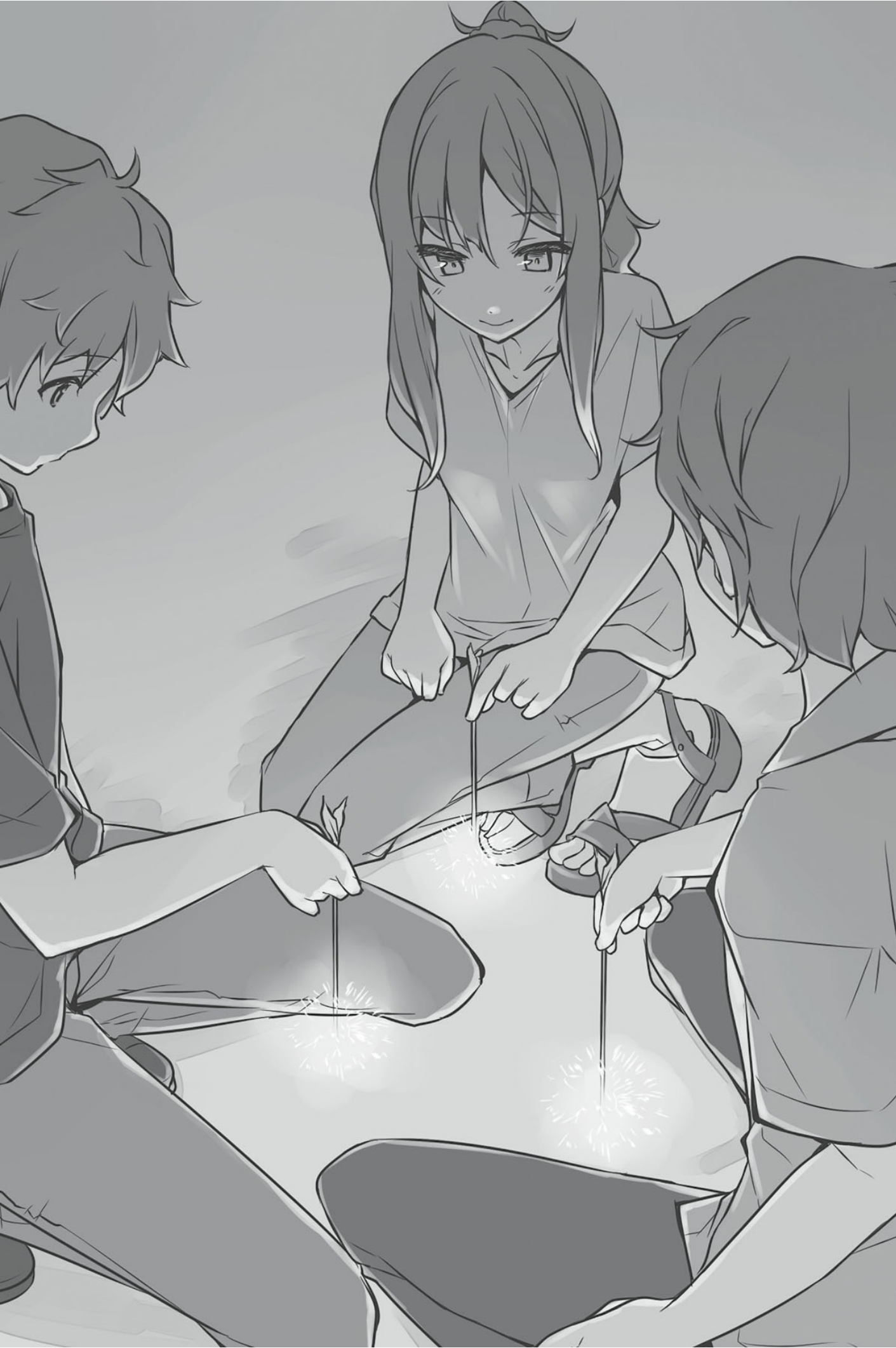
“Forget you saw that.”

“Ah!”

“Aw.”

Sakuta’s and Yuuma’s sparklers died at almost the same time.

“Argh, I lost!” Yuuma said, getting up. He stretched.



They hadn't really been in a competition, but Sakuta felt the same way.

"Good view of it from here," Yuuma said, looking toward Enoshima.

"Huh? Of what?"

"The Enoshima fireworks. Those are next week, right?"

Sakuta stood up, joining him. From this distance, they'd be able to watch the show just fine.

"I literally said that last year," Rio said. Her sparkler was still going.

"You did?"

"And you both insisted we should watch up close."

But it had been packed, their necks started hurting, and the booms were stupid loud.

"Then let's watch 'em from here this time!" Yuuma said, turning toward her with a grin.

When Rio didn't answer, Sakuta said, "No plans to watch them with your cute girlfriend?"

"Ah, I'm in the middle of a huge fight with her," Yuuma said with a wince.

"See?" Sakuta said, facing Rio.

"Don't you have plans with Sakurajima?" she asked.

"Her agency has made dates off-limits."

"That's a celebrity for you," Yuuma said. Finding humor in the misfortunes of others.

"I've got a shift that day, but I'll have Koga fill in for me, so we should be good."

"Don't care about her plans, huh?" Yuuma scoffed.

"You in, Futaba?"

"My schedule's free."

"Then it's settled!"

“Futaba, you gotta wear a *yukata* this time. Make up for today.”

“Wha—?” she yelped.

“Oh, nice! *Yukataaaa!*” Yuuma said.

That really got her.

“They’re a pain to put on,” she protested. Ineffectually.

“So you know how!”

“.....”

Rio realized she’d dug her own grave. She gave Sakuta a furious glare, so he stepped closer and let her punch him in the shoulder.

“Hey,” Yuuma said, still staring toward Enoshima. “I think the sky’s starting to get brighter.”

Sakuta compared the sky near Mount Fuji, to the west, with the sky near Enoshima, to the east. Yuuma was right. The sky in the east was slightly lighter.

“I’ve never spent an all-nighter like this,” Rio said. “What am I doing?”

“Something *dumb*,” Sakuta said.

“Super dumb,” Yuuma agreed.

“Argh,” Rio said. She let out a huge sigh. “It’s a real shame,” she said.

“You heard her, Kunimi.”

“She meant you, Sakuta.”

“I meant you both.”

They looked at each other, confused. But they just didn’t get it. They turned to her, still confused, and Rio smiled.

“If only the two of you were girls.”

Sakuta and Yuuma glanced at each other again.

If they were all girls, maybe she could open up more, share everything she felt. Chances were that she wouldn’t have fallen in love with Yuuma. They could have stayed just friends.

Was that what Rio meant?

“Start wearing a skirt tomorrow, Sakuta.”

“Always wanted to try one,” Sakuta said, not to be outdone.

Rio laughed.

“You’re so dumb.”

She was having fun now. She looked at Sakuta, then Yuuma, laughing.

“You’re both so dumb. And the worst. But...”

And then she broke off.

“But what?”

“Nothing.”

“Come on, now. Spit it out.”

“No way.”

“Aww.” Both Yuuma and Sakuta sounded disappointed.

But Rio wasn’t talking, so neither of them pressed the issue further. They could both guess what she’d been about to say.

You’re both so dumb. And the worst. But...that’s what makes us friends.

Something along those lines, at least.

“Kunimi,” Sakuta said. Without waiting for a response, he tossed him a phone. Rio’s phone.

“Mm? Whoa!”

Though caught by surprise, Yuuma still nimbly caught it. He looked puzzled, but when Sakuta stepped up next to Rio with the water at their backs, he quickly caught on. Yuuma moved over to the other side of her, standing shoulder to shoulder.

“Wh-what?”

She was the only one who hadn’t figured it out.

“Now, now,” Yuuma said, pointing the camera lens at them. He’d already

activated it. He held his arm out as far as he could so they'd all fit in the frame.

"Whaddaya call milk left in the fridge too long?"

"Cheese," Rio said dutifully.

A moment later, the snap of the shutter echoed across the beach.

The three of them chatted away about nothing in particular until the morning sun arrived. Yuuma asked if Rio planned on being a doctor like her father, Sakuta said female doctors that never smile are kind of a turn-on, Rio said she had no such plans, Sakuta said Yuuma had terrible taste in women, Yuuma said Saki had her good side even though they were currently fighting... They opened up, sharing everything and saying whatever they pleased.

When the sun rose, they agreed it was amazing and moving and frankly, after being up all night, too damn bright, so they abandoned the beach.

They made sure to clean up the trash from the fireworks, of course. Like you do with used kebab skewers, they dumped the burnt ends in a plastic bottle they'd filled with seawater.

"Oh, the trains are moving."

They ambled slowly toward Katase-Enoshima Station.

A red station modeled after the legendary Dragon Palace, it glittered magically in the morning sun.

Yuuma left them at the gates.

"I'd better go. See you later."

"Yeah."

Yuuma waved and pedaled away. He was up to speed soon, and disappeared beyond some buildings.

He never once asked Rio anything.

"I can see why you'd fall for him."

"Where'd that come from?"

"Kunimi's too good for this world."

“So are you.”

Rio went through the gates first. Sakuta followed after.

“Don’t lump me in the same boat as Mr. Pleasant.”

“Even you get embarrassed sometimes, huh?”

They stepped onto the waiting train. There were a few other passengers, mostly young college-aged groups. Probably drifting into the first train after being up all night, too. They were mostly exhausted from too much partying. A few were already snoring.

The warning bell rang, and the doors closed.

The train quietly pulled out.

“Azusagawa.”

In the quiet of the morning train, Rio’s voice sounded oddly clear. Her eyes were locked onto the scenery flowing past outside the windows.

“If you’re still scared, I can stay with you again today.”

“I’ll be fine. Right now, I just wanna get home and sleep as soon as possible.”

Rio stifled a yawn.

“Same here.” Sakuta failed to stifle his. “So what is it?”

“About the other me.”

“I thought so.”

“She’s probably in worse condition.”

“.....”

Sakuta gave her a searching look.

“The other me hates me.”

“Oh.”

“She hates the way I tried to get men to validate me. So much, that she thinks it isn’t her.”

And that was why there were two Rios.

“But no matter how much she hates it, loathes it...I’m sure the other one knows, deep down, that it’s undeniably a part of her.”

“What a thorny concept.”

“Yeah.”

If the other Rio hated this Rio, that meant she hated herself. What could be thornier?

“So please take care of her.”

“Sure, but...”

“But what?”

“Next time I pop by the science lab, you’ll owe me a coffee.”

“Fine. It’s not mine anyway...but you think you can handle it?”

She was the one asking but seemed deeply unsure.

“I dunno. We’ll see. But when I saw you crying, I felt like I understood.”

Maybe he was wrong, but he thought he’d caught a glimpse of what she really desired.

“Seriously, forget about that. It’s mortifying.”

Rio curled up, cringing. The train stopped at Kugenuma Beach Station and set out again. It was only a minute from there to Hon-Kugenuma, where Rio got off.

“Want your phone back?”

Sakuta was still holding on to it.

“Take it. Right now, I just can’t.”

She didn’t even want to touch it.

“Got it. Good night.”

“You too.”

Rio waved in the morning sun with a soft smile. Sakuta had known her for over a year, but this smile was so beautiful it made his heart skip a beat.

Rubbing his bleary eyes, Sakuta made it back to his apartment by five thirty.

He figured everyone would be asleep, but as he took off his shoes, he heard someone stirring.

“Welcome back,” Rio said, coming to greet him.

“Yeah...”

“You look exhausted.”

“Futaba, here,” he said, handing Rio her phone. “I don’t think she’ll do it again.”

“...Oh.”

Rio took the phone, her head down, staring at the screen. The photo of Sakuta, Rio, and Yuuma together had been set as the lock screen.

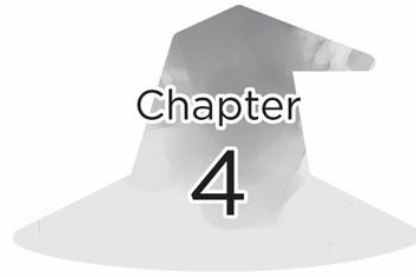
Rio was in the middle, looking surprised. Yuuma was flashing his pleasant smile on the right. Sakuta was on the left, his face half cut off. The ocean, Enoshima, and the predawn glow stood out behind them. It wasn’t a great photo. Hardly art. But it had captured a moment.

“I’ll fill you in later. Too sleepy. Need bed.”

He shuffled into the living room and collapsed onto the carpet. He wasn’t moving again, couldn’t. His eyes closed, and his mind was instantly dragged into the world of dreams.

So he didn’t hear what Rio said next, or catch the sound of the door closing a moment later.

When he woke up that evening, Rio was long gone.



A Night of Rain
washes it All Away

1

When Sakuta woke up, there was a white cat in front of him. Hayate. It was hopping on and off him. Growing up strong.

He sat up and looked around. He knew this place. It was his living room. He must have been asleep on the floor.

His brain finally started moving, and he remembered coming home that morning.

He looked at the clock. It was six in the evening. He'd been out for twelve hours. But still felt like crap. Still sleepy.

His brain told him he had to make dinner, so Sakuta rose to his feet. He decided to wash the sweat off first.

The lukewarm shower felt good.

By the time he left the bathroom, he was fully awake. He went back to the living room in his underwear just as Kaede emerged from her bedroom.

"You're awake!" she said.

"Morning, Kaede."

"You call this morning?!"

"Futaba in her room?" His room was hers now.

"No, she's not back yet."

"Huh? She went out?"

"Yes, right after you got back. She said she wanted to do some shopping."

"Shopping?"

It had been something like six AM when he got home. Who went shopping that early? The only thing open at that hour was the market where chefs stocked up at.

Sakuta opened his bedroom door. Rio's room.

“.....”

It was a bit too spotless. None of Rio's things remained, and she'd probably cleaned on top of that.

He'd just taken a shower, but he was already sweating again.

“That *idiot!*”

Letting the white-hot impulse drive him, Sakuta turned and ran toward the door. He flung it open and stepped outside. But he soon slowed to a stop.

He'd realized he didn't know where he was going.

Also, he was in his underwear. Even in the Cool Biz age, the world was not ready. He was at least ten years ahead of the bleeding edge. He'd have to wait until the dawn of the Dangerous Cool Biz age.

Sakuta went back inside and put on some cargo shorts. While he pulled his T-shirt on, he moved to the phone.

He punched in a friend's number. Rio's cell phone.

“.....”

It rang for a long time, but she didn't pick up. Eventually, it went to voice mail.

“It's me. Azusagawa. Where are you? Not coming back? If you hear this, gimme a call. Mandatory.”

He hung up. The message was probably futile. He picked the receiver up again to get in touch with the other Rio.

“.....”

But as he was about to dial, he realized he didn't know her home phone number. Back in grade school, they'd had class directories with everyone's contact information, but he hadn't seen anything like that in high school. And he'd never needed that information before now.

“Kaede, I gotta leave.”

“Right now?”

She looked so sad, he gave her a head pat.

“Sorry.”

“N-no, it’s not your fault. I’ll be fine.”

“Reheat some curry for dinner.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll probably be back late. Don’t stay up.”

“I’ll wait as long as it takes!” Kaede declared.

He rubbed her head again and left the house.

He hopped on his bike and raced through the neighborhood. He headed to Fujisawa Station first. He considered hopping on a train to Hon-Kugenuma but figured it was only one station away and the bike would get him to Rio’s faster.

The wind on his face had a strange heat to it. And it was very humid. He was old enough to have worked out what that meant.

A typhoon was on its way.

Without slowing down, Sakuta took a look at the sky. Heavy clouds loomed overhead. Strange shapes writhed above, like they were alive, flowing north.

“Won’t be long...”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than a huge drop of water hit his forehead. A second and third hit his body, and then the sky split open.

It was suddenly raining so hard the world around him looked white.

“You’ve gotta be kidding!”

His T-shirt was already heavy and clinging to him.

He considered turning back, but he’d still end up just as wet.

“This sucks! Dammit!”

Swearing aloud, he pedaled harder.

By the time he got to Rio’s house, even his underwear was soaked. It was gross, but he was past complaining.

He pressed the button on the intercom.

He was worried her parents would answer, but it was Rio.

“Azusagawa?” Her voice came over the speaker.

“How’d you know?”

“Camera.”

“So high-tech!”

“Hardly unusual. Come in.”

The gate opened, and Sakuta pushed his bike into the front yard. He didn’t think he’d ever get used to a house this upscale. And dripping water everywhere just made him feel even more impoverished. It felt like the house would reject him on sight.

While he parked his bike, Rio poked her head out the door. In her fluffy pajamas.

“What’s up?”

“Futaba’s gone missing.”

“Huh?”

“She was there when I got back this morning. Then I passed out, and when I woke up...she’d taken all her things and vanished.”

“Just to be clear, we haven’t fused back together.”

“Didn’t think so.” It hadn’t seemed likely. They’d need a reason for that. “Any idea where she’d go?”

“School, maybe,” Rio said. She didn’t have to think for long. It was like she knew the answer. “If the other me is trying to avoid you and us, then...she’s probably there. If I was looking for the last place I wasn’t alone, that’s where I’d go.”

There was a real conviction in her eyes. He didn’t dare doubt her.

“Got it. Thanks.”

There was a huge flash of lightning and a deafening burst of thunder.

“Eep!”

Rio clapped her hands over her ears.

“Never heard you make *that* noise.”

“I-it caught me off guard!”

Before she could even finish her excuse, there was another flash. The noise was almost instant. Very close.

“Eep!”

“.....”

“No,” she said, glaring at him.

“If you’re scared, call Kunimi.”

“Not happening.”

“Just be like, ‘I’m scaaaared’ and make him give you a hug.”

“I would never.”

“One thing leads to another, then what’s done is done, and he’d have to take responsibility.”

“No one would be happy with that arrangement.”

“Well either way, good luck with that.”

Sakuta hopped back on his bike.

“I’m coming.”

“You watch the house. Uh...also, tell me your home phone number.”

Rio went back inside and scribbled it on a Post-it. He took it from her.

“I’ll call if I learn anything. And...”

“She might come here?” Rio said, jumping ahead of him.

She looked nervous. Maybe thinking about those stories about meeting your doppelgänger and dying. With two Rio Futabas, you couldn’t very well ignore them, urban legend or not. Nobody knew for sure what would happen if they met. And Rio’s own hypothesis had been equally dire.

“If that happens...have a rational conversation.”

“Even if I intend to...”

He knew what she meant. There was no telling what the other Rio might do. Given their assumptions about why she'd left Sakuta's house, there was certainly a chance things could turn ugly. If the two of them couldn't merge together again, then only one of them could go on living as Rio Futaba. They'd have to consider the possibility of two Rios fighting for one position.

Bracing himself for the worst, Sakuta rode off. All he could do now was find the missing Rio as soon as possible.

He considered heading back to Fujisawa Station and taking the Enoden to school but quickly abandoned the idea.

He had long since been soaked to the bone, so hopping on a train would be a bad idea. Someone would have to clean up after him.

Also, he was worried about the wind. It was getting pretty strong. Between the winds and the rain, there was a decent chance the trains would get suspended. And then he'd be stuck.

So he left Rio's house and headed toward Enoshima.

Followed the road south onto Route 134.

This road ran along the coast.

It would take him all the way to Shichirigahama. A little over a mile.

There was a strong wind blowing from the ocean. The water's surface was pitch-black, and the bay's usual gentle rocking was replaced with the churn of tall waves.

He narrowed his eyes, fighting the horizontal rain until he passed Enoshima. He couldn't even see the lanterns that should have been lit this time of day, this time of year. Maybe they'd put them away before the storm rolled in.

The wind buffeted his body. Several times it almost knocked him over.

It was a busy road, so that was extra scary, and the cars sprayed tons of water in his direction.

“Ah, dammit! This blows!”

Nobody was listening, but the howl of the wind swallowed his words all the same.

“I hate this!”

He kept yelling. He didn’t slow down. When he saw Shichirigahama, he started standing on his pedals, going even faster.

“You’re a pain in the ass, Futaba!”

He saw Shichirigahama Beach every day, but it looked totally different now. It always had the kind of waves surfers crave, but now the view just made you gulp.

Sakuta turned away from it, pouring the last of his strength into the path to school.

“Ugh... Argh, I’m gonna puke...”

Staggering, he parked his bike outside the closed gates.

Then he climbed over them and stepped onto the Minegahara grounds.

No one here. The Bon holiday ran August 13 (today) to August 16. Students weren’t allowed in school during the interim. He thought they might have a teacher posted, but he couldn’t see any evidence to support that idea. The front doors were closed, too.

“If I came all this way and she’s not here, I’m gonna cry,” he grumbled.

He went around the back, outside the science lab windows.

The other Rio had told him about a window with a broken latch. The second window from the back.

“This one.”

He put his hand on the glass and pulled sideways. It opened right up.

He got his foot over the sill and clambered inside.

“You here, Futaba?”

No answer.

“No?”

Still no answer.

He took off his shoes and socks. Then pulled off his T-shirt and wrung it out in the sink. A fascinating amount of water came out of it. That left his shorts. Since there was no one here, he took off his underwear, too, and wrung everything out. It was like dumping a bucket down the drain.

He couldn't exactly wander around the school buck naked, so he put the gross damp clothes back on. It was horrible, but he didn't have a choice.

The biggest problem was that Rio wasn't in the science lab.

The other Rio had said she would be at school, so Sakuta had just assumed she would be here.

But she wasn't.

Maybe she wasn't at school at all.

But no sooner had the thought crossed his mind than his eyes found evidence to the contrary. There was a phone on the lab table by the blackboard. He picked it up, turning the screen on. It was Rio's.

She had definitely come here at some point. Whether she was still here was another question.

Trying not to panic, Sakuta went to look for her.

But where to? He decided to check the second-year classes to start. Maybe she'd be in her classroom.

On the way to the stairs, he passed the first-year classrooms. Minegahara High put each year on a different floor. First-years were on the ground floor, second-years on the second floor, and third-years on the third floor.

The door to classroom 1-1 was partly open.

"....."

This had been their room last year. Sakuta, Rio, and Yuuma had all spent time there together.

He flung the door open and stepped in.

Someone jumped.

Rio was at the back, by the windows. Sitting on a chair, arms around her knees, staring at him in shock.

“Azusagawa, why...?”

“Ugh, that was a nightmare!” he said, flopping down in a nearby chair. He’d chosen one far from her, right in front of the teacher’s podium. This had been his seat in the third term last year. It gave him an excellent view of the blackboard.

“.....”

He could feel Rio’s eyes drilling into his back. She clearly had her hackles up.

He pretended not to notice.

“Yesterday...no, this morning. I forgot to tell you something.”

“...What?”

“Wanna go see the fireworks next week?”

“Huh?”

This clearly hadn’t been what she was expecting. She must have thought he would yell at her.

“The Enoshima Fireworks! We went last year, right?”

“I know that, but...”

She sounded almost annoyed. Mad at him.

“Kunimi’ll be there.”

“.....”

“We’re talking about doing what you suggested last year and watching from Kugenuma Beach.”

“I...”

“You’re in, right?”

“...No.”

“You got other plans?”

“I’m going to vanish.”

It sounded like she was stifling all emotions.

“You won’t see me again. I’m going to disappear.”

Quiet and cold.

“What the hell are you even saying?” he said, keeping his voice light, ignoring that whole vibe.

“The world doesn’t need two Rio Futabas.”

The other one had said the same thing. They were the same person, so that made sense. And that fact came as a relief. They were *both* Rio.

“If I’m gone, then this can finally end.”

“Will it, though?”

“The other me stopped posting nasty pictures, right?”

“Yeah, she said so.”

“She’s living in that big empty house.”

“Yep.”

“She’s going to school every day, keeping the Science Club running.”

“Sometimes she skips out to watch Kunimi practice.”

“There’s nothing stopping her from being Rio Futaba.”

She was filling in the moats, backing herself into a corner. Closing herself off. Trying to eliminate herself. What must that feel like?

“The first-years on the basketball team thought the other Futaba was cute. They were all excited about it.”

“All the more reason. The other me is far better at being Rio Futaba than I am.”

Another piece fell into place. A piece in the puzzle of despair.

“The other me is a part of this world.”

One more.

“Her Rio Futaba has a happy life.”

The puzzle was almost complete. No, it *was* complete. All that was left...

“If I vanish, it solves everything.”

...was to throw away the leftover pieces.

“That’s not how you solve proofs,” Sakuta said. Maintaining a normal tone of voice.

“I’ve made no mistakes. I’d get full marks.”

“You’ve made a huge mistake! A fundamental one!”

“Then...!” she yelled. There was a crash. She’d jumped to her feet. “Why’d you show me that photo?!”

“.....”

Sakuta looked down at the phone in his hand. The lock screen had been set to the photo of himself with Rio and Yuuma. It felt cheap to put it in words, but that photo was proof of the intangible. It was a symbol of their friendship.

“There’s nowhere left for me to be!” she wailed, a quiver in her voice. “It should be me in that picture, but it isn’t! What other possible meaning could that have?!”

He heard her sniff.

“You don’t need me anymore. You or Kunimi. You both like that one better!”

That’s why she was crying, he thought. Crying her eyes out, like she’d lost everything.

“You’re such a jerk!!”

She suddenly turned on him. Her eyes were definitely boring into his back. He could feel her gaze stabbing into him.

But despite that, he laughed it off.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said. “I can’t believe you’d say that *now*, Futaba.”

“Say what?”

“You *know* I’m a jerk! You tell me that all the time.”

“...Only a jerk would say that *now*! Azusagawa...!”

Before she could say anything else, he said, “So we’ll see you at Kugenuma Beach on the nineteenth. We’re meeting up at half past six.”

Like they were just hanging out in the science lab. Like he was just teasing her about her crush on Yuuma.

Rio fell silent.

“That’s all I got to say,” Sakuta said.

He put the phone back in his pocket and stood up. He’d kept his eyes on the blackboard the whole time, never once looking back at her.

The rest was her problem. If she didn’t reach out to take his hand, he had no intention of doing anything else. He didn’t have the power to draw someone back from the edge of despair. Thinking he could would just be arrogance.

So there was no reason for him to stick around. He took a step toward the door.

But as he did, his vision blurred. He staggered. He barely had time to realize this was what it meant to be “dizzy” before he passed out.

“Azusagawa?!” Rio yelped. It sounded far away.

Everything went black. He couldn’t see a thing. He briefly caught a glimpse of the pattern on the floor, or maybe it was just dirt. But that was it. His mind shut off completely.

2

He was swaying. There were vibrations coming from below, and sometimes he was pulled to one side or the other.

He could hear someone talking.

He tried opening his eyes.

Not the usual ceiling. But he’d seen it once before. And he recognized the sirens. He could hear rain beating against the windows and the squeak of windshield wipers.

“You’re awake?” a man asked, leaning over. He was in his midthirties, wearing an EMS uniform.

“Azusagawa.”

Rio’s voice, from nearby. She sounded worried.

“Uh...did I pass out?”

He remembered feeling really dizzy. And then everything had gone black...and now he was here.

“You’re dehydrated. You likely passed out from a mild case of heatstroke.”

That word was all over the TV this time of year. He never thought it would happen to him.

“Are you in any pain? You might have injured yourself when you collapsed.”

The EMS worker was keeping it simple.

“.....”

Sakuta checked himself, but nothing really hurt.

“No pain,” he said.

“She says you hit your head pretty hard, so we’ll take a look when we reach the hospital just to be safe.”

“Okay.”

Best to do as he was told here.

Only an idiot would collapse and then insist they were fine.

It took about ten minutes to reach the hospital, and then Sakuta was taken to a pretty ordinary exam room. He’d been half hoping to see the sort of ER that shows up on TV, but no such luck.

The doctor who examined him was young, in his late twenties.

“We’re gonna run a CT scan on your head, just in case,” he said.

Sakuta was taken to a different floor. Like the doctor ordered, a huge machine took a scan of his head, and then he walked back to the first exam room.

“Let’s put an IV in you, just in case.”

That was a mildly concerning phrase to hear several times, but he had to trust the doctor. He lay down and let them prick his arm. An IV was pulled over to the bed, and a tube hooked up to him.

“I’ll check in when that’s done,” the doctor said and hustled off.

Maybe there were other patients in worse shape.

Sakuta lay still, watching the IV drip. He soon drifted off to sleep.

When he next woke up, it was because of an odd sensation on his cheek. A sharp little pain, like someone pinching him.

Fighting off the drowsiness, Sakuta opened his eyes.

“Morning,” a beautiful girl said, looking grumpily down at him. She had a tight grip on his cheek. That was why it hurt.

“.....”

He gave her a long look.

“Why the long stare?”

“I’ve got a *really* beautiful senpai.”

“You’re gonna be just fine.”

Sakuta sat up. He didn’t feel dizzy anymore. The IV was empty, and the tube had been taken out. There was some gauze taped over where the needle had been.

“So, Mai...is this a punishment for something?”

She had yet to let go of his cheek.

“For making Kaede worry and then having the nerve to sleep so peacefully.”

“I see. That makes sense.”

He deserved it.

“I’m sorry.”

“Apologize to her. Give her a call, now.”

“Okay,” he said, getting up.

He was about to borrow her phone but then wasn’t sure if he was allowed to use a cell in a hospital, so he decided against it.

They must have public phones here somewhere.

“So why are *you* here, Mai?”

“Futaba called me.”

He’d contacted Rio from Mai’s phone before, so she naturally had the number in her call history.

“Is it okay for you to be here?”

Her manager had told them to avoid contact as much as possible. He hadn’t heard anything about those orders changing.

This was an exam room, so it was somewhat secluded, but there were more exam rooms on this hallway, and doctors and nurses scurrying up and down it. And all of them had seen Mai. One man in a white coat looked particularly surprised, and a nurse clutching medical records did a double take. A few younger staff members were clearly taking unnecessary trips just to sneak a peek at her.

“That’s not what you’re supposed to say to a worried girlfriend when she comes running,” Mai said, rising off her stool.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to worry you.”

“Try again.”

“Engh.”

“Again.”

She was getting crosser by the moment. This was going to go on until he said exactly what she wanted to hear. If he didn’t give it up soon, she’d stomp on his foot.

“I’d really hate it if this leads to you losing your job,” he said, deliberately avoiding the right answer.

“Look, I like my job. It’s fun, and I do want to keep doing it,” she said, sulking.

She broke off and gave him an expectant look. He knew what that look meant. He knew, but he wanted to hear it from her.

“But?” he asked blankly.

“You know.”

“I haven’t got a clue!”

Mai pursed her lips. Then she gave up and said it.

“Work is work, and it matters, but if you get sick, I want to be there for you, and when I’ve got a day off, I want to go on dates.”

She looked grumpy, mad that he’d forced her to spell it out.

“You helped me get back to work, but if that means I can’t see you, there’s no point.”

The force with which this landed was beyond the scope of words like *cute* or *happy*.

“Mai.”

“Wh-what?”

“Can I give you a hug?”

“Why?”

She took a step back, on guard.

“I want to communicate the joy I’m feeling.”

Mai thought about it. Then she said, “Only three seconds,” with a somewhat stiff smile.

“Aw, I think I’ll need at least a full minute.”

“A hug that long would definitely make me pregnant... Eep!”

He threw his arms around her before she could finish. Hands clasped behind her back. Savoring her warmth, softness, and scent.

Mai put her hands on his chest, lowering her head.

“That’s three seconds.”

“Can I get an extension?”

“You’ve got other priorities!”

He did have to call Kaede. And then thank Rio. She’d called an ambulance and ridden to the hospital with him.

“Once I take care of that stuff, can we keep going?”

“You’ve already had ten full seconds, so no.”

“Aww.”

“That’s what you get for not keeping your word.”

He let go of her immediately.

“Too late now,” she said and poked him in the forehead.

He gave her a pleading look.

“Dead-fish eyes won’t help you here.”

“These are abandoned-puppy eyes!”

“Go on. If the doctor comes back, I’ll talk to him.”

“Thanks.” He left Mai in the exam room and went down the hall. “Gotta call Kaede first...”

The public phones were next to an unlit storefront and four vending machines. The phones were the old green type.

He dropped a ten-yen coin in and dialed his apartment number. The answering machine picked up.

“Kaede, it’s me. You still up?”

“Are you okay?!” Kaede yelped a few seconds later.

“I’m fine.”

“I’m so glad... You’re not dead...”

“Don’t bump me off so fast. I got some paperwork to take care of, so I’ll be a while before I’m home.”

He checked the clock on the wall, and it was past ten. He should be home

before the day ended, at least.

“You can go ahead and sleep.”

“I’ll wait up!”

“Okay. Don’t force yourself, though.”

He figured she wouldn’t listen, so he left it at that.

“Kaede.”

“What?”

“Sorry I worried you.”

“I’m your sister. It’s my job to worry about you.”

“Then thanks for being my sister.”

“O-okay! I’ll keep doing my best!”

“See you later.”

He put the phone down and noticed it was very quiet around him. That silence was broken by the ding of an elevator. The elevators were just past the vending machines.

The door opened, and a girl stepped out.

“Ah,” he said. Because he knew her name.

“Huh?” She looked equally surprised to see him.

A younger girl, in pajamas and slippers, a very indoor style—Shouko Makinohara.

“Er, um...why are you here, Sakuta?” she asked, looking everywhere but at him.

Definitely seemed like he’d seen something he shouldn’t have.

“I collapsed with heatstroke and got brought here in an ambulance.”

“A-are you okay?”

“My symptoms were pretty mild, so they gave me an IV and called it a day. I feel better than normal.”

“Make sure you get enough fluids!” she said, finally looking him in the eye. “And enough electrolytes.”

“Good advice.”

“.....”

“.....”

The conversation petered out.

“Uh, so what about you?” he asked. Considering that they’d met here in the hospital, the question was unavoidable. Not asking would be conspicuous, and... he was curious.

“I caught a cold,” Shouko said firmly.

“Oh?” Sakuta stepped up and put a hand on her forehead. “No fever, at least.”

“R-right.”

“And your voice sounds normal. No cough?”

“.....”

“And your nose doesn’t sound stuffy.”

That didn’t leave her with much.

“Sorry, that was a lie,” she admitted.

He’d known it from the start. She was in pajamas and slippers. It was ten PM, and outpatients wouldn’t be milling around. If she hadn’t been rushed here like he had, then she must be staying here.

“...Something wrong with you?”

He hesitated to ask. But she looked so lost that he decided he’d better.

“Oh...,” she began, then fell silent.

“If you don’t wanna talk about it, I won’t ask.”

“No, I think you should know,” Shouko said, looking up.

She’d made up her mind.

They sat down on a bench by the vending machines. Shouko spoke slowly, her voice calm as she told him about her illness.

He immediately forgot the exact name of it and didn't have the slightest idea what the kanji were, but he got that it was a heart condition.

A particularly tricky one, and one that got worse as Shouko got older. There were a number of devices that could prolong her life, but the only real cure was a transplant. There were way fewer organs available for children, so the odds of her finding a donor were very low. And if one did show up, that meant someone else had met with an awful tragedy, so it was hardly happy news.

She was left waiting for a donor but feeling guilty because it felt like hoping for something bad to happen to someone else.

"What happens if you can't get a transplant?"

"When we first found out about it, the doctors said I'd be lucky to live long enough to graduate junior high."

Shouko sounded eerily calm about it. She almost looked relieved. Sakuta wasn't sure what to make of that.

But he did understand one thing.

"That explains it."

"Sakuta?"

"I finally get it."

"Get what?"

"When we were talking about Hayate, you said if you told your parents you wanted a cat, you were sure they'd let you have one."

Without a transplant, she might only live to be fourteen or fifteen. No parents would ignore a request under those circumstances. They'd want to do anything they could for her. They'd buy Shouko anything she asked for and let her do anything she wanted.

"My parents are really nice to me."

"....."

“So nice that no matter what I ask for, they always say yes. And I’m happy for that, but...it also makes things hard sometimes.”

“Mm.”

Sakuta made a noise to show he was listening but figured it was better not to interrupt. It would be a mistake to pretend he understood how Shouko or her parents felt.

“Every time Mom says ‘Yes’ about something, I know she’s saying ‘Sorry’ somewhere I can’t hear. As though it’s her fault I was born with this condition.”

“Mm...”

“That’s why...I still haven’t asked them about Hayate.”

He glanced sideways at her. A shadow had crossed her face. And he knew exactly why.

So Sakuta wordlessly reached out and pulled her cheek.

“Wh-why’d you do that?!” she yelped, completely caught off guard.

“That’s for blaming your mom.”

“Huh?”

“If you look that gloomy every time you ask her for something, of course she’s gonna wanna say sorry.”

“...But—,” Shouko began.

Before she could finish, he pulled her other cheek.

“Sh-Shakuta?!”

That was probably meant to come out as “Sakuta.”

“Makinohara, as long as you feel sorry for being sick, things won’t change. I’m sure your parents know you feel guilty about it. The hardest thing for both of them is knowing they’re making you feel like you gotta be sorry. It’s bad enough your mom feels like it’s her fault you were born like this, right?”

“Well...I think you’re right,” Shouko said. “But what else can I...?”

“What do you really think of your parents? Beyond being sorry for making

them sad all the time.”

“I love them both. A lot.”

Shouko didn’t need to think about that one. So these must have been her genuine feelings.

“Have you told them that?”

“...No.”

“I’d be way happier to hear ‘I love you’ than ‘I’m sorry,’ personally. It’d really make my day.”

“Oh...”

Shouko finally seemed to grasp what he was saying.

“Someone once told me her three favorite things to hear are ‘Thank you,’ ‘Good work,’ and ‘I love you.’”

Sakuta let go of her cheek, and Shouko stood up.

“I...”

She paused, and the elevator dinged. A couple in their late thirties stepped off. Their reaction when they spotted Shouko made it clear who they were.

They’d come looking when she didn’t come back.

“Mom, Dad,” she said, running over.

“Oh, Shouko! If you run like that...,” her mother fretted.

But Shouko just threw herself into her mother’s arms.

“Oh dear. What’s the matter?”

As surprised as she was, her mother still hugged her back.

“Mom, Dad, thank you for everything.”

“Where’d that come from?”

Her parents looked at each other.

“I love you both. I love you so much.”

“Well, we both love you, too.”

Her father reached out and rubbed her head.

“That’s right.”

“I’m glad you’re my mom and dad.”

In her mother’s arms, Shouko looked up with a smile like a flower blooming.

“Shouko...”

Her mother’s voice was choked up, and there were tears glistening in her eyes. Her father looked away, wiping his eyes. There was a real warmth to the moment. Everyone there cared about one another.

“I...have a favor to ask.”

“What is it, Shouko?”

“I want a cat.”

She asked with a bright smile. And her parents responded in kind.

“Okay! Let’s do that.”

After Shouko went back to her room with her parents, hand in hand, a voice called out behind Sakuta.

“Azusagawa.”

He turned to find Rio standing there.

“You up and around already?”

“Well, even if I collapse again, I’m already in the hospital, so...”

“You’re an awful patient.”

Rio sighed but managed a half smile.

“Don’t forget I’m an awful friend!”

“Seriously. What a cheap trick to pull.” She scowled at him. “I couldn’t just leave you lying there, could I?”

“Well, sounds like it was a worthwhile collapse.”

Sakuta sat down on the bench by the vending machines. Rio joined him, leaving enough space between them for two other people.

“Thanks for calling Mai.”

“You should be grateful.”

“That’s why I’m saying thanks.”

“Not to me. To Sakurajima.”

“...Was she *that* worried?”

He hadn’t gotten that impression talking to her, but she *had* rushed over here. Maybe she’d been more scared than he thought.

“When she first got here, she wouldn’t stop holding your hand while you slept.”

“Did you get a picture?”

“Of course not.”

“Aww, I would’ve killed to see that.”

“You really are an idiot.”

Her chuckle echoed through the silent hall.

“.....”

“.....”

When the conversation died down, the quiet of the late-night hospital grew even more pronounced. The hum of the vending machines did little to alleviate it.

Rio stretched out her legs, staring at her toes. Searching for the right words.

“Azusagawa, I...”

“I don’t wanna hear any more bullshit about how you aren’t needed or how you vanishing solves everything, or how you’re actually just scared and don’t know what to do.”

“.....”

There was a long silence. He must have guessed right.

“It’s fine if you don’t like yourself.”

His voice drifted through the quiet hallway.

“.....”

“I tend to be a ‘to hell with it’ kinda guy, personally.”

“That sounds like you,” Rio said, sighing softly. “Anyone else would tell me I should work on finding things to like about myself, or start telling me all the things they like about me.”

“Man, trying to put a positive spin on everything just gets exhausting. People who love themselves can go to hell.”

There’s no way to force yourself to like what you hate. Trying to force the issue only generates friction or pressure. It just backfires. If you’re just gonna make yourself suffer, giving up on positivity is a perfectly viable tactic. Two years ago, Sakuta had found out just how helpful that could be. Kaede’s problems had taught him that. Fighting wasn’t always the right answer. And that was fine.

“You’re the worst, Azusagawa. But...that’s a comfort, sometimes.”

Rio seemed relaxed, like there was a weight off her shoulders.

“It really is,” she said.

When your emotions become all drawn tight, it didn’t take much to snap the thread. It’s important to give them some slack sometimes. It makes everything so much easier. When things relax, it can suddenly become much easier to gain a new perspective on the world around you, like Rio was now.

Rio tended to bottle everything up inside, so she needed to vent sometimes. To find a way to let go.

That extra pressure seemed gone now, Sakuta thought.

“Um, Azusagawa...,” she said reluctantly, after a long silence.

“Mm?”

“...The fireworks.”

“Ah.”

“Can I really come?”

“Hell no.”

“.....”

“Not if you put it like *that*.”

Rio let out a long, thoughtful sigh.

But it only took her a few seconds to work it out.

“I—I want to come see the fireworks,” she said, unusually flustered.

She didn’t often let her real feelings show, and it was awkward for her.

“I’m not the one you should be telling.”

He flipped a ten-yen coin in her direction. It traced a gentle arc, and she cupped her hands, catching it. She looked toward the pay phones.

Rio got up and headed over to them.

She lifted the receiver, inserted the coin, and dialed a number. He could hear it ringing over his shoulder.

Her breathing sounded tense.

He heard the call connect.

Rio took a deep breath.

“I... I met up with Azusagawa. And...I have a favor to ask.”

She paused, took another deep breath, and then let her feelings out.

“I want to come see the fireworks, too.”

No words followed. Her breath and presence vanished. There was a clunk.

Sakuta quietly turned around.

Before him stood a green pay phone. The receiver dangling. Nobody in either direction—just the long hallway. As far as his eyes could see, there was no one here but him.

He stood up, picked up the receiver, and held it to his ear.

“Helloooo?” he said, a bit jokey.

“Get back to your exam room, Azusagawa. You’re keeping Sakurajima

waiting.”

“Now I can finally flirt to my heart’s content!”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.”

“I’m happy to share.”

“About the fireworks,” Rio said, forcibly changing the subject. “You’d better not be late.”

“You can be a little late if you want, Futaba. I know putting that *yukata* on will take a while.”

“I really have to wear that thing?”

“There’s no point going to see fireworks if you don’t have a girl in a *yukata* with you.”

“Fine... Well, I did promise.”

She sounded like she was looking forward to it.



All That Remains
After the Fireworks
Are summer memories

August 19.

The day of the Enoshima Evening Fireworks.

Sakuta headed to the meeting place at the Kugenuma Beach Station and found Yuuma already waiting.

“Sup.”

“Sup.”

Despite his height, Yuuma looked good in a *yukata*.

Sakuta was wearing one, too.

Rio had forced this on them, saying it would be too much if she was the only one.

He'd managed to put it all together for a reasonable enough eight thousand yen. He'd also bought one for Kaede, and that had been way more expensive. He was gonna have to put in more hours at work for a while.

“Koga really did take your shift, huh?”

Sakuta had originally been scheduled to work this evening.

“I owe her a parfait later.”

He was planning on making a big deal out of it being six hundred calories.

“Good to have friends.”

A train pulled into the station.

She was already late.

There were plenty of other *yukata* in the crowd filing out. At the very back, Sakuta spied a familiar face.

“Yo, Futaba!” he called out, waving.

Their eyes met, and Rio instantly stared at her feet. Even from this distance, he could tell she was bright red.

Without looking up once, she shuffled over to them.

Yellow and pink flowers on a field of white. The obi was a soft yellow, too,

quite cute. She had her hair up but glasses on. The navy-blue *kinchaku* in her hand complemented the other colors.

“You’re back to wearing glasses?”

“I-is that odd?”

She touched the frames, looking nervous.

“Nah, they look good with the *yukata*. Right, Sakuta?”

“It’s kinda sexy. Right, Yuuma?”

“Mm, you’re not wrong.”

“This is exactly why I didn’t want to wear one,” Rio scowled. But she sounded at least a little bit pleased.

After a leisurely ten-minute walk from the station, they reached the beach just as the first firework went up.

With a loud crack, beautiful flowers bloomed against the night sky. As those faded, the next firework sent bright colors across the Enoshima skyline.

Some fireworks streamed downward like willow trees. Others were like stacks of rings. One after another...

Sakuta, Rio, and Yuuma watched the dazzling display without saying much.

As the finale approached, huge fireworks dyed the night in vivid colors, lighting up the beach, Enoshima, and Benten Bridge.

The last volley was genuinely satisfying. The booms echoed inside them.

“Kunimi,” Rio said softly.

“Mm?”

“.....” Her voice was drowned by the fireworks.

“What?” Yuuma said, leaning closer.

Rio cupped her hands, stretching to meet him. She whispered something. Just a few words. By the time the next firework faded, she’d stepped away.

She was staring at her feet, biting her lip. Her face was red. And clearly not because of the light of the fireworks.

“Futaba, I...”

“You don’t need to say it,” she said, stopping him. “I know the answer.”

“...Oh.”

“And if you say anything, I’ll have to cry.”

“Then Sakuta would lend you his *yukata* sleeve.”

“Feel free to get snot all over it.”

“You’re an idiot,” Rio said, grinning at him. She grinned at Yuuma, too. Then she took Sakuta’s arm with her right hand and Yuuma’s with her left. She pulled them both closer, staring up at the fireworks.

“Oh!”

“Whoa.”

Neither of them had expected this.

“I’m the only one.”

“Hmm?”

“The only one who can watch fireworks standing between the two of you.”

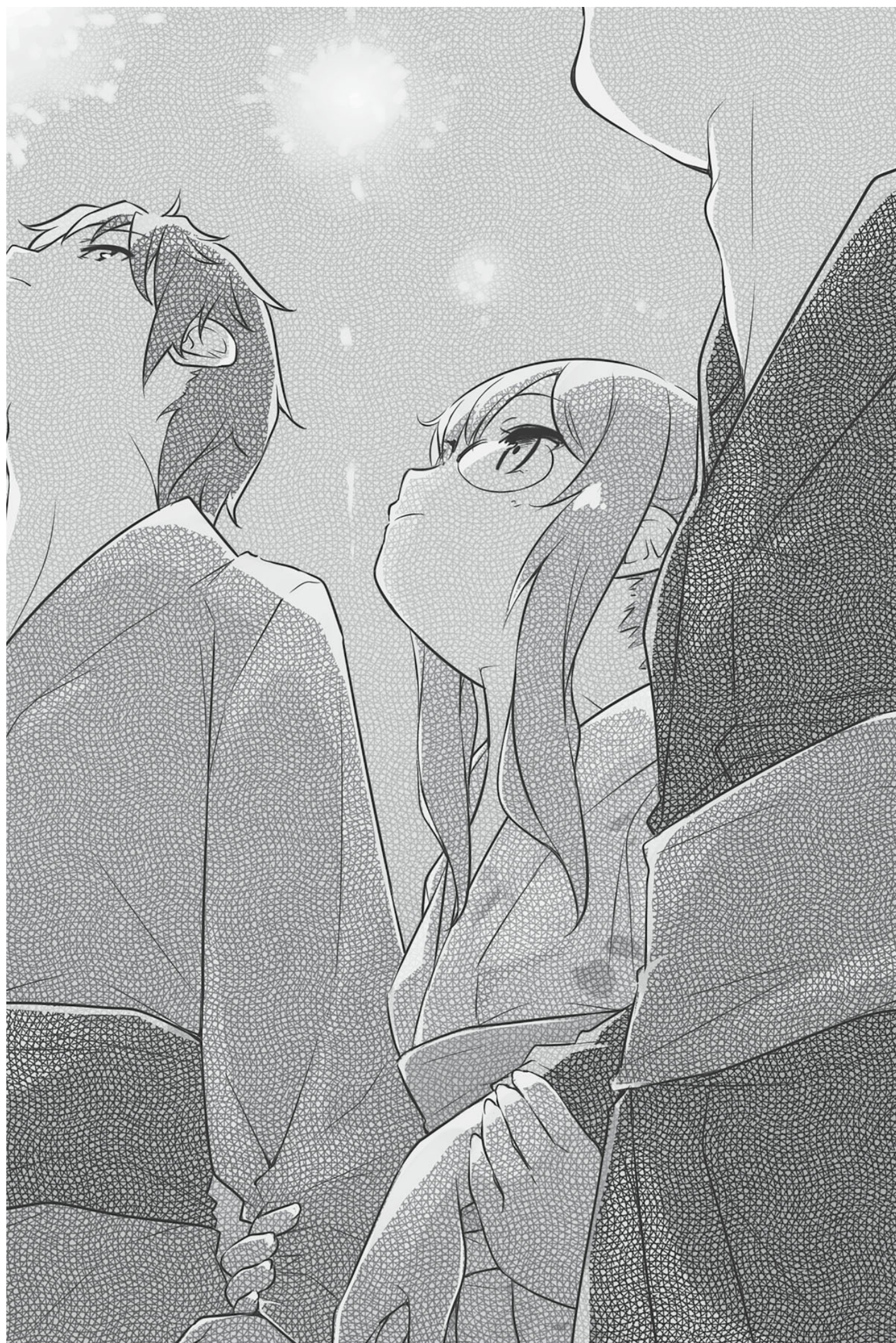
There were tears at the corners of her eyes, but there was a smile on her face. So Sakuta said nothing. He just looked up at the fireworks again. Yuuma did the same.

Fire flowers bloomed over Enoshima.

The sight seared itself into his eyes.

This was a memory that would last a lifetime.

The summer of their second year in high school. The three of them would look back on this together someday.



There were ten days left in summer vacation, and they passed without incident.

The no-dating order remained in place, so he and Mai spent no time together. She was too busy with work anyway.

Sakuta had nothing better to do, so he spent most of it at his job. Sometimes he stopped by the science lab at school to hang out with Rio. Rio said he just got in the way of her experiments, but he ignored her.

And before he knew it, the long summer vacation was over.

August 31.

Shouko and her parents came over that morning. She was feeling better and had been discharged two days before. They were here to pick up Hayate.

Nasuno came to the door to see them off, and her meow seemed a little bit sad. Kaede poked her face out from the living room, and she looked sad, too. But she waved good-bye anyway.

This was how it should be. It was a good thing, and they should all be glad.

“Um, Sakuta,” Shouko said, sounding a little nervous.

“What?”

“Er, um...”

When their eyes met, she looked away. Unusual. Her head was turned slightly downward, her cheeks flushed. But then she looked up again.

“Can I come over some other time?” she asked.

“Sure. If you bring Hayate with you, I’m sure Kaede and Nasuno will be thrilled.”

“And you?”

“Mm?”

“Will you be thrilled?”

“.....”

“Sorry, that was weird.”

She turned red, shrinking. Sakuta patted her head.

“Come over anytime.”

“Okay!” she said, looking up. She was beaming now. She waved and left with Hayate and her parents.

He never did figure out what the deal with her and the Shouko from two years ago was. But considering how happy Shouko looked...

“Well, whatever.”

The next day was September 1. The start of the second term he’d hoped would never come.

It was still hot as hell, but Sakuta had no choice. He headed out to school. At least he could see Mai there. That was motivation enough.

On the Enoden Fujisawa Station platform, he ran into Yuuma and Rio. It wasn’t often all three of them rode in together.

“Sup.”

“Sup.”

“Mornin’.”

Rio had her glasses on and her hair up. This made her look smart and mature. With a touch of sophistication.

“What are you staring at?” she demanded, glaring. But she knew what his look meant. And that’s exactly why he didn’t mention it.

“You finish your homework?” he asked.

“It’s so you to ask that after summer vacation’s *over*.”

The retro train pulled up to the platform. They weren’t even at school yet, but the sight of this already felt like proof that second term had started.

Sakuta and Yuuma pushed Rio in through the doors at the back and took a seat on either side of her.

Then Sakuta felt eyes on him. He looked, and standing in the next door was Yuuma’s girlfriend, Saki Kamisato. Their eyes met, and she turned away.

“You’re still fighting?”

“It’s a cold war now.” Yuuma grimaced.

“Then you’d better go over there,” Rio said, giving his much bigger frame a push.

“Uh, wha—? Futaba?”

“If you won’t say *why*, then it must be about me or Azusagawa, right?”

“Oof. Uh...”

Yuuma winced, unable to think of a good answer. Sakuta had been assuming pretty much the same thing.

“What happened?” he asked.

“So, uh...I found something missing in the contact list on my phone.”

“Me and Futaba?”

“Nope, just you, Sakuta.”

“Vicious.”

“That’s not worth fighting over. Go make up with her,” Rio said. It didn’t affect *her*.

“No, but...”

“If you dither like this, my resolve will waver.”

“Can’t argue with that...”

Yuuma made up his mind. He stepped off the train and, before the doors closed, stepped on again at the next door down. He stood next to Saki, and they started talking. Saki seemed a little nonplussed by this, but it didn’t take long for her to start smiling. That looked like relief to Sakuta.

Not wanting to see them be happy together, Rio leaned against the door, using Sakuta’s body as a shield.

“You could have just left them alone.”

“No, it’s fine. Couples break up, and that’s it.”

“.....”

“And I want something that lasts.”

“You’re *such* a sore loser.”

“Shut up.”

Rio puffed out her cheeks like a little kid. He’d never seen her look that childish. It might take her a while to fully sort out her feelings, but this was progress. At least...*she* thought it was.

The short four-car train pulled out of the station with them on board.

The opening ceremony forced all one thousand students into the gym. As testament to the fierce heat, the majority carried fans with them.

Well-tanned students kept those fans flapping all through the principal’s grand speech. The teachers didn’t stop them. Nobody wanted to deal with heatstroke.

Five minutes passed, and the principal’s speech still showed no signs of ending. Letting it go in one ear and out the other, Sakuta glanced toward Class 3-1.

Mai’s class.

But he didn’t see Mai anywhere.

She’d called the day before, saying they’d see each other at school, so he’d been looking forward to it—was she running late?

The opening ceremony wrapped up, and they dispersed to their respective homerooms. Sakuta’s homeroom teacher said, “Let’s just muddle through it,” whatever that meant—probably well aware that students just off vacation were deeply unmotivated.

Sakuta picked up his bag, left the class, and headed upstairs to the third floor. The third-year students’ domain.

Class 3-1’s homeroom was still going, so Sakuta peeked in through the back door.

“.....”

Still no sign of Mai. Her seat was empty, no bag near it. Seemed like she was absent.

Certain she wasn't here, Sakuta headed downstairs to the pay phones. They were in the corner by the offices.

Popping a ten-yen coin into the phone—he was probably the only person who ever used them—he dialed her number.

“.....”

She didn't pick up. After ten rings, it went to voice mail.

“Uh, it's Sakuta. You weren't at school, so I figured I'd call. I'm headed home for now.”

And with that, he hung up.

He let out a long sigh. He'd been sure he could finally see her again today, so it was a crushing letdown.

“Well, she'll have to make up for this later,” he said, trying to find a positive spin on it.

He headed home.

It was a fifteen-minute train ride from Shichirigahama Station to Fujisawa Station. And a ten-minute walk from there to his apartment.

He stopped outside, looking up at the building across the street. Mai's building.

He considered ringing her intercom, but as he did, the front doors opened, and someone stepped out.

“Oh.”

It was Mai.

Her eyes met Sakuta's. She blinked twice. Then she looked away and walked right past him.

“Mai?” He reached for her shoulder.

“?!”

She brushed his hand away, wheeling around to face him. Looking alarmed. Her eyes swept over him.

“Er, what?” he asked. This was really weird. Something was wrong.

She looked exactly like Mai but seemed like someone else entirely.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Huh?”

He couldn’t understand what that meant.

“I said, who are you?”

There was a note of aggression in her voice. None of her usual confidence. She was giving him a look of deep suspicion, not even trying to hide it. Like she was a total stranger.

He’d only *just* wrapped up Rio’s case, so...was this another doppelgänger?

“Sakuta Azusagawa,” he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “You may have heard of me. I happen to be dating you, Mai.”

“Pfft,” she said dismissively. “My sister would never date someone with eyes as dead as yours.”

“Huh?”

He blinked at her. Had she just called Mai her sister? Did Mai have a twin? No, she’d mentioned having a younger sister before, but that was a pretty nontraditional sister, one her father had with his new wife after the divorce. They unquestionably had different mothers. Not only were they not twins, there were several years between them, and there was no way they’d look this much alike.

But what other possible explanation was there? He was totally lost.

So there was only one thing for him to ask.

“Who are *you*?”

Afterword

This is the third book in the *Rascal* series.

The first volume is *Rascal Does Not Dream of Bunny Girl Senpai*, and the second is *Rascal Does Not Dream of Petite Devil Kohai*, so if this book has piqued your interest, I suggest buying those as well.

If you picked this up thinking it was the first volume...I'm sorry.

And if the start of this afterword is giving you déjà vu, sorry again.

I've been getting lots of questions, so let me discuss the title further.

The reason we decided to change part of the title each time (rather than number them) was because each volume has a different female lead.

With the spotlight on a different character each time, I wanted to put them all up on the billboard—I hope that logic makes sense.

Accordingly, the fourth volume will also be *Rascal Does Not Dream of...* something. At this point, it seems likely one of those words will be *Idol*, but can we be sure?! What *kind* of idol?!

Mai will definitely feature heavily next time. At least, that's the plan. It seems unlikely to change...at least, I don't think it will...or will it?

To my illustrator, Mizoguchi, and my editor, Araki, thank you for all the hard work you poured into this volume. I look forward to working with you further.

And I must express the deepest gratitude to all readers who have followed me this far. I hope we will meet again in the fourth volume. Which will probably be out...this spring...I think.

Hajime Kamoshida

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